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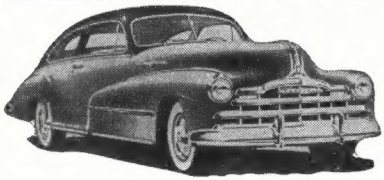

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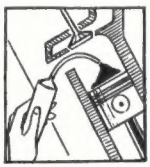

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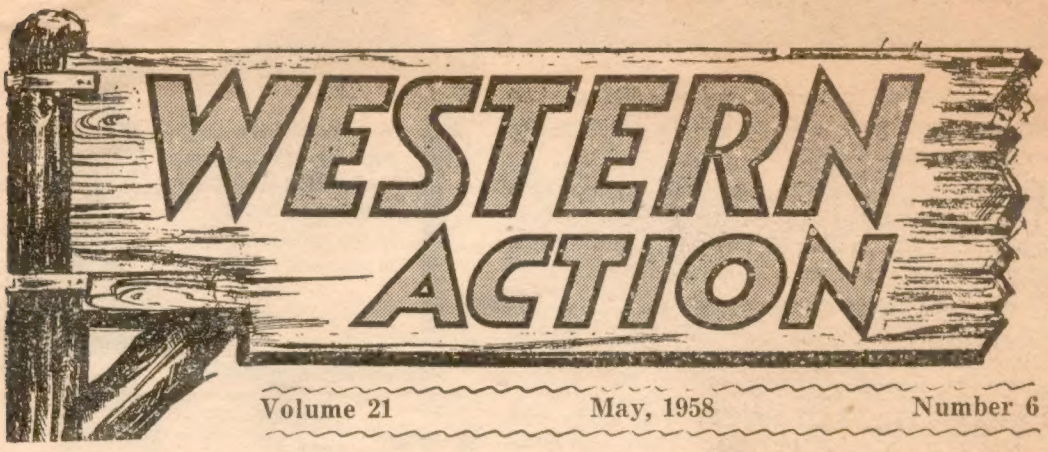

Volume 21 May, 1958 Number 6

Featured Novel

SIX-GUN PEACE-BRINGER ..... Bradley Burr 8

Dave Bell had nothing whatever to gain in getting mixed up with the feuding Franes and Jolsens. It was clear that, whoever had been at fault originally, both families were tarred with the same stick — both were guilty of multiple murder and thievery. But Nick Jolsen and Kay Frane could end the feud, and Bell was willing to take risks that these two might come together.

Other Stories and Features

COW COUNTRY QUIZ ..... James Hines 5

Can you figure the answers out, before turning to page 94?

LAWMAN'S SALVATION ..... T. R. Young 51

He pursued those who fled from justice as a means of escape...

ALLIES FOR BOOT HILL (Novelet) ..... H. C. Early 57

The word of Luke Hagen was as good as his bond — both were equally worthless. But Ezra Darrell had to trust him when they faced a common enemy, for the sake of Hagen's kidnapped wife...

SUSPECT THEM ALL! ..... Clare Hamilton 74

Mart Kramer couldn't afford to believe anyone here, without evidence!

THE CONQUEROR (verse) ..... Edward Garner 98

Oh, he was tough — but she was rough!

ROBERT A. W. LOWNDES, *Editor* MARIE ANTOINETTE PARK, *Asso. Ed.*

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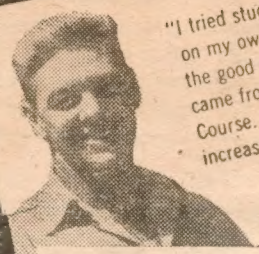
not at all, scientists say



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COW COUNTRY QUIZ

Special Feature by James Hines

WESTERNERS and *amigos* in spirit, here's a chance to learn how you rate. Below are listed eighteen questions on cowpunchers and ranching topics. Try your luck with them, and see how many you can hold the jerk line over. Call the turn on sixteen or more of them, and you're a sagebrusher from way back. Get at least fourteen right, and absolutely nobody can call you a yack. Pitch your line over thirteen, and you're still not in the tenderfoot class. *Mucha suerte, amigos!*

1. Old-time cowmen will tell you that it is quite an art to water a trail herd of cattle safely. How would you go about this?
2. What year was it that Kansas passed a quarantine law against Texas cattle, because of Texas fever?
3. What does the term "pin-wheeling" mean?
4. According to the Westerner's way of thinking, a "fence lifter" is: A man who steals? A very hard rain? A person who tears down your fence? A fellow who is crazy?
5. If an oldtime Western friend of yours told you he was going after a "fizzy," you would know he was going after: A horse that limps?

[*Turn To Page* 7]

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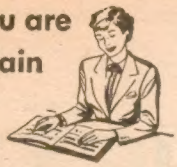

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✶ COW COUNTRY QUIZ ✶

A part for a buckboard? His daughter, who is arriving from the East? A range horse with a bushy tail?

6. What does the cowpuncher's slang term "fumadiddle," mean?

7. A fuste is: A person released from prison? A Mexican saddle? A well-broken horse? A Spanish term for a man who is deaf?

8. According to the cowpuncher's way of thinking, what is meant by "giggle talk?"

9. If you had a horse of a "grulla" color, you would have a horse of: A reddish-brown color? A bluish color? A mouse-colored horse? A solid black horse?

10. What is a hell stick?

11. What is a yack?

12. The Dinosaur National Monument is located in what inland Western state?

13. Perhaps the cowboy's most dreaded accident is to have a running horse step in a hole and fall with him. Name two of the animals whose digging make such danger holes on the range.

14. The largest helium gas plant in the U. S.—probably the largest in the world, is at Amarillo—in what state?

15. According to legend, the fabulous Seven Cities of Cibola were located on the Mojave desert of California. True... False...

16. Famous for its irrigated farms of cotton, lettuce and other vegetables, the Salt River Valley lies in what Southwestern state?

17. True or False? The Daltons, the James boys, and the Youngers were all first cousins.

18. What ranch, in what year, brought up the three last herds of cattle on the Texas trail?

(*Answers to this Quiz are on Page* 94)

SIX-GUN PEACE-BRINGER

Novel of Feuding Families

by Bradley Burr

If you called stock detective Dave Bell sentimental, he'd deny it; if you called him a Good Samaritan, he'd laugh at you. Yet Dave had nothing to gain, and everything to lose by mixing into this bitter feud between the Franes and the Jolsens. All that could come of it, at best, was that Nick Jolsen and Kay Frane get together — and what was most likely was that Bell would be among the good men killed in the bloody ruckus!

AFTER trouble-busting to a fare-you-well on the Jiacarilla range, Dave Bell, stock detective, thought he would return to Mesquite County, Arizona, by a different route than the one he had taken in coming to Lincoln County, New Mexico. That was how Bell happened to be riding up the Pecos where that river bends its course through Guadalupe County. Half a day's journey ahead of him lay the vast Pintado Basin, a fair-to-middling cattle country, sparsely populated, by all accounts.

Bell, desiring to see the sights only, was purely in the tourist frame of mind as he hit the out-trail from Timber fork. All was sunshine above and about him, not a single ugly customer on the road—it was all too doggone good to last. He was in fine fettle, though—wounds healed, forking his California saddle, and wearing the Colt he had toted from Arizona, recovered at the headquarters of the Toombi gang.

The stock detective had one more meal, the midday snack, on the bank of the Pecos, before his pony made a track in the big basin. Pausing at the top of the downgrade, his gaze roved leisurely from point to point, along the haze-blued farther rim, curving in a rude circle around to where he sat his horse; into the sun-searched depths, comprising open

Kay Frane and Nick Jolsen had to meet secretly...

grassland, range for cattle, and mesquite-covered areas and rather ragged timber strips.

There were not many signs of human habitation, but Bell could not glimpse all, nor even half of the warped ranch buildings and corrals which the dwellers of Pintado Basin had erected to house themselves and impound certain of their stock. Most of the latter ran wild, of course, and there was rumor that some of the humans ran as wild as any orejanas that ever bucked the brush to avoid a cowboy's rope. Perhaps the gossip Bell had heard of the basin's "cussed" characters—nameless to those who spoke of them—had proved a lure too strong for Dave Bell, man-hunter and hardy adventurer, to resist; but he would have denied it to anyone who asked him. "No; just seein' the country."

He was destined to see as much of

that country as any man who lived in the basin, and to become acquainted with the seamy side of existence there. His initiation commenced two miles from the draw by which he had entered the great Pintado bowl. A rifle cracked with a vicious note as he was pacing easily along a track worn by horse traffic through one of the brush-and-boulder sections.

Dave Bell wasn't anticipating ambush. As he lunged over to the far side of his pony, rendered skittish by the unexpected voicing of a Winchester .45-90, the thought percolated through Dave's mind that whoever had picked him for a target must have had the sun in his eyes or else was a tyro. How could the lead have missed its target, sped at such close range as the sound of exploding powder indicated?

While he was clinging redskin-wise, with one toe at his pony's tail and one bunch of fingers firmly locked in its mane, peering under the arch of the animal's neck for a giveaway dribble of smoke by which to locate his unknown enemy, a rifle of similar caliber and make tuned up on the trailside on which his lean, long body was exposed. A cross-fire! Two riflemen had him between them. That was something of a new wrinkle in ambushing; but it ought to be a meat-getter.

BELL WONDERED that he was living to hear the report of Rifle Number Two; yet it was a surprising truth that this second bullet had done him no more damage than the first one fired. If all the iron-toters of Pintado Basin were as erring in their gunwork as the two whose skill Dave Bell was sampling, there must be a lot of lead wasted in a year's time and not enough punctures to keep a doctor in cigaret money.

"I reckon I'm as safe straight up as sideways," muttered Bell, and righted himself in the saddle amidst a merry crackling of rifles, giving his horse the spur and leaping ahead to shelter.

He reached an untenanted mesquite patch with hide scarless—not only his own hide but his horse's as well. As marksmen the two cross-fire workers certainly copped the brandy! Bell hadn't stopped to give them any back talk there in center-trail, but the moment he had unshipped his toes from the stirrups where the mesquite reared high, he yanked the old reliable, stampede-battered Colt out, up and forward —a continuous motion beautiful to see, if the human eye could have followed it. But he held fire; it was one of the few instances in which he had drawn that gun without letting it flicker.

And the reason his trigger finger stiffened instead of bent was that he awakened to the realization the cross-fire had not been a cross-fire and the .45-90 slugs hadn't been meant for him. Two dwellers of Pintado Basin were engaged in the good old border game of "pot". Dave Bell had accidentally ridden between them and with a fool's luck prodded out unscathed.

THE REPEATED failures to hit him were explained. His head framed in leafy mesquite branches, Bell watched the smoke balloon up from the two trailside points opposite each other and the hand in which his gun was fitted lowered slowly until the front was rubbing a flange of his caparejos.

"Each of 'em behind a rock, I reckon, an' the bullet ain't been run yet that'll grind daylight through granite," he commented, turning to his horse as if he expected the animal to voice agreement. "Well, I wish 'em a smearin' good time, an' it's nothin' to me who wins the headstone. Reckon I'll scatter on."

But he didn't. He was replacing his six-shooter in the sheath, and guessing not inaccurately that the cessation of

rifleplay betokened time off for recharging empty magazines, when the sharp cry of a woman or girl in pain changed him from a disinterested party to a hundred horse-power meddler.

Quitting the side of his horse, "tied" by the fallen reins, Bell scouted for the point of interest. He didn't have to cross the trail to reach it; it was on the same side on which he had taken refuge. That outburst of feminine distress, stabbing the air once again as he stalked forward pantherlike, so quickened his step that, without realizing it, he was charging helter-skelter through the mesquite when a small break in the tangle confronted him. Caution was cast to the winds.

He saw two figures—a man in cowman's garb, and a girl in an obviously home-made riding habit. The man was burly, and the absence of a hat on his big square head showed his hair silver-shot in much the same manner that Bell's own was streaked with the winter sign; the girl, slim, probably less than twenty years old, sun-seasoned a healthy brown. As for the man's coating of tan, he could have passed for a Mexican or even a Negro, he was so dark. Rage convulsed his broad features; he had wrapped the double thongs of his quirt around the young woman's wrist and was sinking the rawhide in her flesh with wrenching twists so violently that she dropped to her knees as Dave Bell loomed on the scene.

Wearing no hat herself, the girl's mass of hair, blue-black and lustrous, had become loosened and was streaming over her shoulders and arms, partly hiding her face. Bell projected himself into the proceedings with a hard fist swinging at the end of a long, muscle-knotted arm. His attack was such a total surprise that the gent with the quirt hadn't the fraction of a second left to him for dodging. He received Bell's straight-from-the-shoulder blow flush on his lantern-jaw, and his lights winked out.

"Ma'am," said the hunter of cattle thieves, unwinding the rawhide thongs from the girl's wrists and revealing a cruel red ridge in either one, "I dunno what ol' Silvertop is to you exactly, but I'll swear he ain't no benefit." He helped her to her feet and gently massaged the angry-looking welts.

The girl did not at once enlighten him, as it was evident he wished to be informed from the remark just made. She was fighting the tears from her eyes—and her voice. Her gaze went to the burly man, who lay parallel with a half-rotten log behind which he had crouched during the rifle practice lately ended (and not a rock, as Bell had supposed). The Winchester he had used was within easy reach of Dave Bell, but the cowboy detective didn't trouble to possess himself of it. Let the "old gentleman" retain his hardware and if he chose a rôle of ugly acting on his return to consciousness, Bell was all set to give him hell as a favor.

"It's funny," remarked Bell, nodding toward the six-shooter in a holster on the girl's thigh, a .38, "you didn't heave that grub-spoiler on the fella—or mebbe he grabbed you too quick, eh? Ain't you got a tongue an' a story, sister?"

"I couldn't. He's my father!" She was pretty enough to make Bell wish he was younger and better looking.

"Oh," said Bell, swallowing the information like a bitter pill. "In that case you wouldn't want to kill him, but I think he needs his brand changed—some families sure draw deuces for head-riders, don't they now?"

She was silent a moment; then, "It's all because he don't want me runnin' with the son of his worst enemy. You know Arn Jolsen?—he's my Nick's old man."

"Lady, I don't an' I ain't sure

whether to be sorry or glad," returned the stock detective. "What was the rifle work for? Is Arn the fella bushed-up 'cross the trail—"

"I'll answer you from now on, you six-toed son of a bat!" boomed a voice —the man on the ground speaking.

"COME RIGHT back to earth with us pop!" grinned Bell; his eyes were alert behind slitted lids. If the gray-pated old buzzard did any streaking for that rifle or his belt-holster, he'd find Dave Bell's boot tucked under his chin and lose teeth as well as his senses—the stock detective was in a position to do this; he didn't think deuce-high of woman-maulers.

Holding his jaw, the rawhide citizen rose to his feet. The brush was high enough here to shield persons of average height who did not top themselves with a hat; Bell wore his John B. and it bobbed in plain view of the bushwhacker over the way, but that individual knew it didn't belong to Walt Frane, and besides, was fearful of hitting the daughter, Kay. He had thought the girl was gone when he commenced swapping the lead with old Frane.

"Lookit here, you!" bawled the warhorse of the throbbing lantern-jaw, "what's the idear luggin' your ugly mug intuh my game? I dunno who you are, but I'll tell you who I am," and he did.

"Walt Frane, eh?" smiled Bell. "What'm I supposed to do—kowtow or somethin'? I didn't pay no attention to the reward dodgers I passed in my recent driftin's, so you'll hafta excuse me not recognizin' you. I'm not out for blood money today, so you're safe from the sheriff a while longer—don'tcha make any sly tries for that smoke-wagon, Walt!" The last sentence crackled with electric emphasis.

Frane straightened his gun arm. A fancy murder—or even a plain one —would have yielded him untold joy at that moment, but the steel-eyed, unhandsome stranger had the appearance of being baked hard enough to take apart any "hell-fire and brimstone" combination without cracking from the heat.

"I was aimin' to peg out a polecat an' it's my own dang bizness!" stormed Frane, letting his glaring gaze shift for an instant to his daughter's face.

It was patent that she was in a quandary, resenting her father's treatment and grateful to the stranger, though undecided about taking sides with him against her rip-roaring parent.

"I ain't carin' two whangs on a wishbone how many polecat pelts you ventilate, Frane; I sabe they need airin' if you stay in the same neighborhood. What I bulled in for to do." Bell's long chin jutted in Frane's direction, "was to stop you buck-hidin' this girl. She says she's your daughter —well, that's sure a fact to cause a hombre with my kind o' feelin's to carol 'The Cowboy's Lament.' Wonder she wouldn't slope off the home ranch if you act up much thisaway."

Frane dove for his Colt this time; no man with his temper could listen passively to such talk from another man, especially a fellow who was a stranger and had laid him ignominiously in the dust, insulted him about his picture on a sheriff's dodger—it would take a sheriff with more temerity than the one the county then had to tack up any such notice for Walt Frane! His attempt to draw nearly cost him dear; he was looking down the bore of Bell's gun barrel before his fingers fairly closed on the stock of his own "spit-flame" (and Frane was reckoned quickest of the quick in the Pintado Basin).

"I been seein' the killer blaze in your eye ever since we started to trade talk, you big beef! Well, mebbe you think you got reason to hate me that

bad—I'm glad I got in that sock on the jaw, anyways. My name's Dave Bell, should you crave to refer to it later, but I can't give no address because it changes as constant as I move by picket-pin. I'm tellin' you to travel, right now; I want to see which way you head so's I can go the other an' avoid a bush-up. Leave the skunk killin' till later or I'll do some on my own account in half a minute— *Git!*"

"By Gawd, Bell, you'll cut my sign again!" Frane's rage was so intense that he spoke not much above a whisper.

"Won't hafta get off my hoss to know that sign, should I cut it," responded Bell; "my snoot will tell me!"

"C'mon, Kay!" Walt Frane wheeled abruptly, snatching up his rifle and sombrero, and tramped away for the denser brush without a backward glance.

THE GIRL faced Dave Bell squarely before she followed her father; the stock detective could have imagined almost anything more easily than that she was the flesh and blood of Frane. She stretched forth a hand, and his met it halfway. He noticed how hard the skin of her palm was, very like his own; she must do more than housework; probably chased the tails of longhorns like any cowboy on her father's range.

Her gratitude for his interference was expressed in her handshake. Kay Frane uttered no word. She was gone in the tracks of old Walt before Bell could think of anything to say, leaving the quirt which had welted her wrists lying at the cowboy detective's feet. He picked it up, pulling the thongs through his fingers and regarding it thoughtfully. Then suddenly, he flung it from him; it was not properly a souvenir, he wanted to forget the occasion on which it had been used, or rather, the use to which it had been put. As far as meeting Kay Frane was concerned, that filled a fellow with as much joy as a thirst-crazy prospector would feel at stumbling on an unexpected waterhole in the desert.

Bell heard the movement of horses in the direction the Franes had vanished; the clip-clop of loping hoofs receded and died without him being afforded another glimpse of father and daughter. His mind was so centered in the girl that he totally forgot the particular Jolsen who had been duelling with Walt Frane, and stepped carelessly into the trail, preferring an open route back to his hidden horse than to buck the mesquite again. The instant he showed himself he was reminded how incautiously he was proceeding; that other .45-90 gave voice once more and Bell's hat jumped.

His first thought was of self-preservation, to leap back where the partly decayed log lay; but in a flash he altered his decision, and, raising both hands above his head, he walked nervily toward the place of ambush. If there was a spark of fairness about the bushwhacker he could not fire upon a man who came thus boldly advertising peaceful intent. The reason Bell followed such a course instead of one seemingly more natural in the circumstances, that is, seeking shelter and taking up his own end of the shootfest, was that he strongly suspected this hidden rifleman was the Nick Jolsen whom Kay had spoken of possessively as "my Nick," and not Arn, the father.

Rumor was so far substantiated; there certainly were "goings on" in Pintado Basin if the happenings of this afternoon were representative of the normal state of things. Bell, thinking as well of Kay Frane as he did, was curious to learn what sort Nick Jolsen was and far from anxious to sift a lethal bullet under the fellow's vest, because he was manifestly the object of Kay's affections.

DAVE BELL hadn't quite achieved the edge of the opposite trailside

when the brush parted to emit a youthful figure, that of a good-looking fellow, cowboy-rigged, who held a six-shooter belt-high; the Winchester rifle had been left in the mesquite as the hand-gun was better for short-range use. The black beaver sombrero of the boy was cocked rakishly on one ear; he needed a shave and his hair needed cutting, but the clean cut of his features was not marred by this lack of tonsorial attention. Bell could easily imagine a woman seeing worshipful qualities in the young man.

"Sink you heels where you're at, buckaroo!" barked the unshaven, unshorn gun-toter and Bell halted. The young man continued, as he paced a few steps more and took root, "You're the hombre went a-clattin' up the trail awhile back, less'n I'm cock-eyed."

"You're seein' straight," Bell assured him. "I reckon enemies was layin' for me an' had got me in a crossfire till—well till I learned different. You're Nick Jolsen, mebbe?"

"That's me," admitted the other, the unfriendly look in his eyes deepening. "But how d' you know? I ain't reckernizin' you none whatever from a flock o' muddy bull-tails."

"The lady over the way, Kay Frane, gave me the idea who you might be, though she didn't have a chance to say outright, her pap buttin' in mouthy. She asked me if I knowed Arn Jolsen, —which I don't—goin' on to eloo-cidate that Arn is the pappy o' her Nick. What's wrong in this basin, Nick, between the Franes and Jolsens? Did the families work up a shootin' 'cause a coupla their young folks took a shine to each other?"

"If you're diggin' for information, stranger, you'll find me a plumb holler horn." Young Nick Jolsen was ridden by suspicions so disturbing that his mental processes were akin temporarily to those of a Kentucky moonshiner who meets a stranger inside the established deadline. Jolsen didn't believe this unknown was interested in his love affair with Kay Frane, but was angling for a line on matters not supposed to reach the world beyond the rim of Pintado Basin.

"What you doin' in here?"

"Passin' through on a roundabout trek to Arizony, seein' the sights an' enjoyin' the sunshine—when it ain't too hot." Dave Bell read the other's mind correctly and foresaw trouble. But he did not judge the young cowboy too harshly nor intend to handle him more roughly than necessary if the present situation could not be amicably terminated.

"Yeah, passin' through!" snorted Nick, vastly sarcastic. "What led you to figger you was bein' ambushed, then? No reason to have enemies that'd bush-up to getcha, if you was just tourin'—statin' it plain, I reckon you lie, hombre—steady! If you're lookin' for rustlers, go over to the Lazy F; they're sure an onnery crowd an' every one a crook but Kay!"

Bell did not like being told that he lied any more than the next man; almost involuntarily, his gun-hand had started down to connect with the walnut butt of his .45, causing Jolsen to warn, "steady!" He restrained himself, doubting not that the young puncher would shoot to kill or maim unless he, Bell, stayed that straying hand. Both arms lifted to full reach again, the cowboy detective denied that he was "lookin'" for anyone.

"Well, that might be so an' again mebbe not," commented young Jolsen. "I reckon my pap would whale me, big as I am, if I let you go a-roamin' without a passport from him. You'd admire a powwow with pap. Where's your hoss?"

BELL DIDN'T respond verbally. Perceiving that he was due to pay a possibly unpleasant visit to the tribe of Jolsen if he continued to let young Nick hold him up, he took action

which he considered involved the least chance of his getting drilled. Most unexpected and decidedly painful to Nick was the kick Bell suddenly delivered with his narrow-toed boot on the Jolsen shin. The moment that steady-lined gun barrel dropped out of focus, Bell lunged and tore it from the weakened grip of Nick.

"All right, shoot, you belly-draggin' coyote!" raged young Jolsen; he displayed a very real courage as he stood defying the man who had annexed all the artillery (except the rifle in the brush, which might just as well have been lying over in the adjoining county).

"No, no, you get me hindwise, Nick; I ain't bloodthirsty whatever." Bell, forgiving the fact the young puncher had called him out of name now that he had the upper hand, strengthened his denial of blood-lust by sticking Nick's gun in his waistband. "Listen, I like your looks an' the looks o' Kay Frane appealed to me similar—as for her old man, I cain't say as much; he's the bottom card o' the deck if I got any kind of a gambler's nose. I reckon I want to be a friend to you two, you an' the girl. Can't you be civil an' give me the straight o' the tangle?"

"I don't need no outside help; I can run my own romancin', stranger." Even disarmed, Nick Jolsen was going to be hard to convince.

But Bell was patient with him. "You don't have to keep callin' me stranger, bud,—yell 'Dave Bell', an' I stands in the saddle an' cheers myself. Don't be a fool cub. Say, you saw where I come from this last time, right outta the brush 'cross the way—Kay Frane had quit cryin' out, hadn't she?—an' she an' her pap rode away, didn't they? Well, I ain't boastin, but she'd 'a' been rawhided to the bone if I hadn't mixed in—"

"Her old man is the son of a dog an' I'd admire to dry his mangy hide on our front door!" broke in Nick, wrathfully. He was slowly coming to his senses, too, believing less and less that Bell had an ulterior motive in questioning him. "The way it come about me an' ol' Frane clashed s'afternoon was this: I cut Kay's sign about fifty yard down the trail, both of us ridin'. A plumb accident this time, but o' course there's been plenty other times when our meetin' wasn't no accident. Anyways, her bull-bellerin' ol' man comes on us on-expected, comes a-shootin', an' the plumb wonder is that I ain't a corpse. I run, him havin' me foul like he did, an' first thing you know we both was burrowed an' hell-poppin' the way you found it. I thought Kay had skedaddled, but I reckon the game kid was stickin' round to help me—Walt would lash hell out o' her for that, damn him!"

"Suppose you'd killed her old man, wouldn't that 'a' made some of a breach between you an' Kay?"

"No, don't reckon it would. He treats her roarin' rough, just like he was a-doin' when you butted intuh the play. Sure she wouldn't think less o' me, stran—Bell. Why, didn't that hell-bender pap o' hers peg out two o' my brothers a month back, an' did it change my feelin's toward Kay—nossir! I dunno," he looked away from the unwavering glance of Bell, and a mournful note crept into his voice. "Sometimes I wish this damned feud 'tween our Rafter J an' the Lazy F would chop off short."

"So there is a feud on, eh?" said Bell gently, full of sympathy for the two young people who were evidently striving to be loyal to each other through thick and thin, against the misguided wishes of their respective families.

Nick jerked his head around when Bell spoke; perhaps the younger man felt that he had said more than he ought. But the expression of Dave Bell was winning, his ugliness could not detract from the charm of his slow

smile; it cast a spell over Nick Jolsen; and loosened his tongue. "Of course you sabe the Lazy F was to blame in the first place," he began; biased, certainly, because he was of the family that bitterly opposed the Lazy F spread.

Bell gave ear to a tale that is not new on the frontiers of America, be the period today, yesterday, the day before that or far back in the dim years of first settlements on this continent: the tale of a feud, reeking with gore, resulting to date in an appalling death list. Like the famous feuds of Kentucky mountaineers was this bitter struggle between the Franes and the Jolsens, the earliest settlers of Pintado Basin.

According to Nick Jolsen, the Lazy F had started hostilities by trying to hog all the best grass for the cattle under their iron; a Jolsen, one of Nick's uncles, had gone to rest in boothill when the rifle of a Frane (it was uncertain which one) laid him low from ambush. Frane blood was spilled by the Jolsens in swift retaliation. That was the beginning and the end was not yet in sight; feuds of the sort usually did not terminate until the last member of each warring family had had a notch cut for him. Bloody senseless affairs, these frontier feuds, in which the innocent suffered alike with the guilty.

Dave Bell realized, of course, that he was getting but one side of the imbroglio, the Jolsen side, but having seen Walt Frane and not only seen him but witnessed his style of action, the stock detective was ready to believe the faction headed by the old pirate quite capable of the violent deeds Nick Jolsen laid verbally at their crimson-splashed door. Kay was the exception in her clan, no doubt, just as Nick probably had in him the makings of a better man than were his father, brothers, uncles. Outside of Nick, the Jolsens likely were as hellbent a crew, every bit, as the Franes; therefore Bell held his clan sympathies in reserve. It might have been the Jolsens, and not the Franes, who precipitated this endless war of cattleland, but Nick would have been brought up to believe the reverse was true.

BEFORE Nick had finished running off at the head, Dave Bell smoked three quirlies to a thin spark. "It makes rocky ridin' for you romancers, sure," said the cowboy detective. "Wish I could help you get together."

"Ain't nothin' to be done but go on killin', I reckon," returned young Jolsen, much of his self-assurance gone from him. "There won't be no real peace in the Pintado, Bell, till the last Frane—always exceptin' my Kay—has felt lead shred his guts, take it from me!"

Bell knew that had his vis-a-vis been a Frane, the Jolsens would have been similarly charged with keeping the basin cattle country in a turmoil. He tossed away the end of the last cigaret he had lighted and passed Nick Jolsen the latter's gun, stock first.

"Don't feel like feedin' me outta this now, do you?" he asked, as the son of the Rafter J boss clamped brown fingers on the curved walnut grip.

"Nossir, Bell! You ain't a Federal officer, be you?" This anxiety about Bell's identity, or, more accurately, his calling, led the stock detective to believe that the cattle rustling of which Jolsen accused the Lazy F might be traced, not instead, but also, to the Rafter J. Each outfit probably rustled off the other at the least chance presented.

"Son," said Bell, putting out his hand, "I come intuh this basin for the ride, like I told you, an' I'm not workin' for the Gov'ment—where you headin' from here?"

"Home; my hoss is in the bresh. Kay an' her pap must be halfway to

their ranch by now, copperin' any chance o' me waylayin' him again today." Nick's manner of saying it revealed his vicious upbringing. "Where you goin'?"

"Hittin' the trail an' I'll stop where dark catches me. If our trails don't happen to cross later, bye an' luck. Pass on the same to your girl from Mr. Bell."

"Mr. Bell, I will! The same to you. Sorry I vented your John B. an' poked a gun on you—an'—an' called you a liar."

"O. K., son. Sorry I had to kick your shin."

They parted, more than embryonic friends. As Nick vanished in the mesquite, Dave Bell hit the trail dirt to where he'd left his cow pony. Nick had not asked him to stop over at the Rafter J, and doubtless omitted this custom of the country, an invitation to every transient to share the beans and sowbelly, out of pure friendship for Bell. Young Jolsen knew too well how warmly strangers were welcomed at his home ranch. Nick was a shrewd one.

- 2 -

BELL, LOPING on through the golden afternoon, was in a deeply thoughtful mood. Moved by a healthy admiration for Nick Jolsen and Kay Frane, he seriously considered driving his picket pin in Pintado Basin long enough to aid their cause; it was not only the promise of excitement that put this "bee in his war bonnet," but genuine concern for the predicament of the lovers, kept apart by the mutual hatred of their families. Pintado Basin patently needed cleaning up; and Bell rather agreed with Nick from what he had been told of hair-trigger conditions, that peace would come to stay only through—extermination! A harsh conclusion, yes, but there seemed to be no alternative, no choice except to wipe out the warring parties.

It was no quarrel of Bell's unless he wished to make it so, and if he did he would be actuated by a desire to give the unfortunate a helping hand rather than to satisfy any sense of duty to law and order. What odds to him if two dishonest spreads stole each other blind in the eye and ragged? There was no call for him to act officially (but unofficially he might enlarge his scope of action). He was not a man who cut notches ordinarily, but if he tossed his John B. in the ring this time there was every reason to believe he would be able to nick the whole length of his gun-stock at the wind-up; provided someone didn't cut a notch for him!

The war clouds were gathering above Bell's head that afternoon. He had been parted from Nick Jolsen an hour before he knew it. Rafter J cowpunchers (men who had been trained in the cattle game but fallen into evil ways and hired principally because of their fast gun hands) were ranging that part of the basin where Bell rode, and two of the Jolsens were with them, uncles of Nick—Lem and Henry. They would have told any inquiring mind, if inclined to answer at all by word of mouth instead of a smoking six, that they were maverick hunting, but every man toted a short running-iron in his bootleg or under his saddle-fender. A rifle in a scabbard was part of every rider's equipment, and this was an unusual item, smacking of the days when redskin raiding hordes threatened every range. It showed conclusively that war was on between the dwellers in this basin, and not the ordinary war of honest cattlemen against preying cattle thieves.

The Rafter J riders were pretty well scattered, working draws and arroyos for strayed and hiding cattle of any brand, preferably prime stock of the Lazy F, which should become Jolsen cattle as soon as fire could heat the irons white. Coming down a sage-grown slope which was so steep they were obliged to lean hard cantleward, Lem Jolsen, lean and ratty of face, with a fringe of beard to accent his ugliness, and a gun-expert top-hand known as Shotwell Clay, espied the rambling Dave Bell far below and to eastward. Thinking he might be a snooping Lazy F rider, as none of the Rafter J punchers were "combing" in that direction, Lem got a pair of field-glasses from his saddle-pockets and focused long-range on the invader without halting his slipping, sliding pony.

"Who is it?" grunted Clay, saturnine of countenance.

"I'll never tell you, Shot," replied Lem, studying the distant horseman intently and undisturbed by the erratic motions of his own cayuse as it strove to keep from descending to the bottom of the slope on its nose. "Stranger, by damn!" Lem knew every dweller of the basin by sight and name. Bell was a new one on him.

"STRANGERS doesn't go ramblin' through here without a passport, does they, Lem?" None would have thought, from Clay's expression, that he was in the least interested.

"Not if my name's Jolsen, an' specially not when we're maverick huntin'! County law dogs know enough to let us alone, Shot, but you never can be shore a Federal officer won't sift in some day. The doin's in this basin might stink pretty rank to outsiders, you sabe; an' if the Governor of New Mex wanted to make it hot for us, he could. The Franes, damn 'em, wouldn't hone to have no law dogs sniffin' 'round in here no more than our gang; but we mustn't be overlookin' the fact the two pioneer families is no longer the only families hereabouts. Uh course, folks that's not lined upon one side or t'other o' the feud knows us well enough to be doggone cautious what they do...but we've never been pa'tic'lar whose cows we rounded up, an' some booger that's lost a few brands is likely to try an' get at us underhanded. There's always that chance; Arn, Henry, an' me was discussin' it only the other night."

"Which windy chest-load, punctured, means we're due to lay out this stranger hombre!" observed Clay.

"You've roped the idear, Shot."

DAVE BELL wasn't thinking of birds and sunshine as he rode around the looping trail above a cut bank, half a mile from the slope from which Lem Jolsen and Shot Clay had spied on him; but neither was Dave thinking of foes in the tanglebush. The affairs of Nick Jolsen and Kay Frane still held stage-center of his mind.

The trail dipped some fifty yards beyond the cut bank, brush growing thickly on either hand along the horse-broken path of dun hue. This side of the depression and on the right, he observed an unnatural agitation of the mesquite. Man or beast, not the wind, was responsible for the trembling of the leafy branches; and Dave would have gambled on it being a man or men the instant his attention was caught.

The brush was agitated but briefly, but it sufficed to warn Bell. The fact was that Lem had been angling for a glimpse of the picked victim without revealing himself, to see whether Bell would take the turn-off at the cut bank. Satisfied that the stranger under suspicion was heading the way they wished him to, Lem sank back beside the morose Clay.

Bell was well aware that he had made a deadly enemy since his arrival in the basin; but Walt Frane had not come in this direction and it was rather stretching the imagination to suppose he had cut a circle to ambush the stock detective so far from the place of their first meeting; if Frane had intended laying for Dave Bell that afternoon, he doubtless would have turned his game back-along several miles. But someone was lving in wait!

The nimble-witted Bell swung out of the saddle with his horse going at a fast lope, cutting the bay gelding lightly with his quirt. Sleepy—that was Dave's name for the bay because it was addicted to dozing on three legs at every opportunity—racked on at unabated speed, though possibly wondering why the master quit the saddle in this fashion. On the balls of his feet, his spurs tinkling lowly, Bell walked snailishly after the loping pony, his right hand hovering over his gun-stock.

NOW SLEEPY was heading by the ambush—two men tumbled precipitately into the trail and one of them had a Colt filling either fist. Lem Jolsen and Clay had only waited for the horse's head to pass into their range of vision before they sprang the attack, wishing to take the rider alive and pump him for information; but there was no rider...

As the rustling feudists stood rooted to the ground with surprise at the trick played upon them, Sleepy executed a startled sideward leap, twitching his reins out of Jolsen's reach, just as the six-shooter of Dave Bell sped a bullet to the right shoulder of the two-gun man. Clay was the nearer target at the moment and two guns are twice as dangerous as one, Dave figured. He was advancing down the trail at a quickstep now, not afraid to shoot it out with any pair of hombres that ever rode the plains. He had thought the brush might contain greater odds.

Shotwell Clay, with one arm hanging broken, the gun it had swung fallen at his feet, began to throw lead with his left-hand forty-five. Bell all but stopped a bullet, too. The cowboy detective ceased his rapid striding long enough to sight a bead on the remaining good wing of the two-gunner, and smashed a slug through bone and muscle above the elbow. With a cry like a trap-bitten animal, Shotwell Clay released his second gun and staggered backward, almost into the mesquite patch.

Dave Bell moved again and at greater speed, calling on Lem Jolsen to hurl his gun down and his hands up. Lem wasn't the white-livered kind, but his nerve was considerably rocked by what had happened to the deadly Clay, supposedly unbeatable. In the end, Lem Jolsen caved.

Halting in front of the two oath-spitting feudists, Bell looked from one to the other over a gently flourished gun and demanded "why-for" of the bushwhacking that had failed. "You're not ridin' for Walt Frane, are you?"

"Which I should shout to hell we ain't belongin' to the gang that dang thief an' killer rides herd on!" whooped Nick's uncle. It was the first time in years he had put his hands up at the command of any man and it stabbed his pride deeply. "I'm Lem Jolsen, I am, an'..."

"That's a-plenty; I sabe it all," nodded Bell, and a faint smile broke through his grim mask. "You jiggers must be up to somethin' crooked yourselves an' expectin' a visit from the U. S. Marshal or somebody. Most hair-triggery folks in this basin I ever whacked ontuh. Now, what had I best do with you?"

THIS LAST was hardly the question to put to the men held up by his gun and perhaps he was not address-

ing them but himself, though his steady glance included both stormy countenances.

"Call us crooks?...damn your nerve an' onbridled tongue, stranger! The Rafter J outfit hangs together, lemme tell you, an' should you mistookenly decide not to quit us pronto an' peaceful..."

"Aim to hang together, eh?" Bell interrupted with a quick grin. "Well, that'd probably cause peace to roost in Pintado as soon an' fast as any method—providin' the Franes hang alongside you—now, chop that dirty stuff, Jolsen; tain't fit to flow in a pig's ear. Put me in the notion o' that lynchin'-bee your ownself..."

"Up hands, over there!" shouted someone behind Bell. "Drop yours, Lem, we got 'im covered!"

The stock detective yielded gracefully, not wishing to have the crown of his head blown level with his eyes. After his Colt had been taken and his person frisked for something to identify him (said something not coming to light), he coolly relieved certain vest pockets of Durham and papers, ignoring the repeated order to "sky 'em!"

"What's the sense to that?" Bell inquired, with a grin at the irate Lem Jolsen, who had assumed full bossing of the situation. "If I want a smoke it won't be no extra nicotine in your lungs, though I misdoubt you got both o' the last, from the narrow look o' you. Behave an' hush!"

The broken arms of the groaning Clay had been examined by Lem and the other four; a doctor was needed on this case, they quickly decided. What became of Shotwell, the stock detective couldn't say, but he did not accompany the horseback party which got on the move downtrail in half an hour from the time Dave Bell had broken up the ambush.

All that Bell knew of their destination was from dire talk of "that quicksand behint the Halfway Shack—just the place to sink spies." They insisted he was a spy of some kind, even though there had been nothing in his clothes of a nature to confirm this suspicion. All he would answer them was, "I ain't nobody in partic'lar—my name's Bell, if that'll do you any good"; careless whether they recognized it or not.

THE "HALFWAY SHACK," had been built by the Franes and was so-called from the fact that it stood halfway between the home ranches of the Lazy F and the Rafter J, nearly on the boundary line which had become a sort of deadline almost from the moment that these pioneer families threw down in Pintado. The Franes had used this shack for a line-camp; but as the Jolsens invariably killed off the line-riders sent to occupy it and Walt Frane couldn't spare more than two men at a time to hold this section of his range, it was christened Halfway Shack and left to stand as long as it could defy the elements.

It had since been used by both feudists factions on different occasions for various purposes, the principal one, "forting"; the gang that reached it first. Naturally its possessors had the advantage when Lazy F and Rafter J cut each other's sign on the range; it developed into a kind of game, which might have been called "hit the fort." Back of this shack, conveniently placed for the disposition of a corpse (or plural, as was oftener the case), a restless mass of deadly sand blocked the channel of a Pecos tributary.

When Dave Bell got his initial glimpse of the weed-growing dark muck which was the local "boot hill," he could not help wishing heartily that his end had come about through the medium of center-placed lead, at the time he was engaged in breaking the gun arms of Shotwell Clay. He

didn't like the view a bit, and a man is surely entitled to his own likes and dislikes.

HE WAS SWUNG off Sleepy and ordered at the revolver's muzzle to walk into the quicksand; but this was expecting a little too much of him. The desperado outfit—how else should the Rafter J men be designated?—abandoned the "persuader" method of getting him into the sand-choked channel; neck and heels they threw him as far as two men, Lem Jolsen and another, could heave one hundred and seventy solid pounds of fellow being. Dave Bell struck the slimy surface on hands and knees and with a splash, starting to sink at once. He tore his hands free of the muck and shook impotent fists at the evilly guffawing group on the river bank.

"You lousy killers, if I ever get loose..." he yelled, getting no further than that when Lem cut in:

"We ain't worryin', 'cause you won't get loose; nobody nor nothin' that's gone intuh that squashy stink-pool ever come out again. Reckon, if you're a deppity marshal, your boss'll be lookin' for you down this-away, but them sands is like dead men for keepin' secrets. You ruint Clay's arms an' come pesterin' where you had no bizness—an' now you gotta pay!"

Bell thought they were going to stay and watch him die, but they did not. Sleepy, Bell's bay gelding, had run away soon after his master was ordered out of the saddle and Lem deemed it the wisest course to trail the bay down and shove him in to keep Dave company at the bottom of the sucking sands. The U. S. Marshal of the district (the Rafter J bunch were almost ready to stake their lives on Bell's being a deputy) would know that his understrapper had reached the Pintado if Sleepy were found there; and U. S. Marshals had a way of boring through to a desired goal where county sheriffs might admit themselves up a stump.

Moving toward their ponies, Lem Jolsen and his men climbed into the saddle and were off at a quick canter around the corner of the Halfway Shack, leaving Dave Bell to fight hopelessly for his life. This does not mean that Bell did any frantic, unsystematic struggling or thrashing about, for such actions would only sink him the more rapidly. He bent over, touching the water-filmed surface as lightly as possible, just to support himself while he strained every muscle to release his right leg before the quicksand had crept knee-high. This didn't work much in his favor, for while he was freeing his right the left leg dropped deeper than ever; and his hands went under and his arms clear, he bore his weight equally on both legs again and glanced somewhat despairingly toward the bank; it was a terrible feeling to know that terra firma was so near and yet too far away for him to reach it. The river itself was an even greater distance from the helpless man, lapping the edges of the quicksand mass which interrupted the natural course of the stream.

If it only lay within his power to gain the unblocked channel he would very shortly be ashore and safe, for he was a fairly good swimmer. But he was powerless to move from the spot where he had landed, bogged down like any of the thousands of cows which have died in the mud-holes of the Southwest while seeking much-needed water. He recalled, as he stood there slowly sinking, the times innumerable that he had ridden off his course at the sound of a plaintive bellow from a half-dry water-hole and dropped his succoring rope over the horns of a bogged "critter"; and he wished that such a life-line were now available for his own use.

"I reckon it's a matter o' seein' how game I can meet the Boss Rider," he murmured, looking down at his chap-clad legs, which had almost wholly disappeared. "Dang stuff's grippin' an' draggin' at me like a pair o' giant hands."

DAVE BELL'S train of thought was broken by hoofbeats.

His eyes lifted from resigned contemplation of the scummy quicksand and an ejaculation of genuine amazement burst from his lips as he saw who was riding down to the bank opposite him—none other than Kay Frane.

"Tell me it ain't a ghost I'm observin', girl!" he shouted.

She reassured him that she was flesh and blood, and sprang to the ground, working fiercely at the tie-straps of her saddle to release her rope coil. She, too, had yanked doomed critters from bogholes; and what was efficacious in the case of the cows would be efficacious for a human in a similar fix. He'd have bet his bottom dollar that the girl was a top-rope, and her first cast toward the quicksand proved it. Still able to bend from the waist, Bell stretched long arms for the water-slabbing loop which spread itself in front of him.

When he was ready to be "yanked," Kay carried the home-end of her lariat to her saddle-horn and dallied; the man in the quicksand cried, "All right!" grasping the taut rope to ease the strain on his body. The horse began towing under careful guidance. Bell's chest, back and arm-pits suffered to no mean extent as the hempen band tightened, despite his rigid handhold; but the pain was nothing compared to what he would have undergone otherwise. Soon he was far enough out of the sucking mud to work his legs and complete their liberation; steadily the horse pulled, Kay at its bridle, facing toward the quicksand to note the progress of the range detective.

Presently Bell was sliding on his belly through the filthy water which topped the treacherous sands; his face became generally plastered with slime and by the time his head butted into the low bank, he couldn't see a thing. He thrust one hand aloft and felt it grasped strongly in both of Kay's; her stout pulling got him to his feet and then she guided his groping steps until he stood beside her horse, well away from the margin of the quicksand. While she was loosening the noose strained tight under his arms, he employed his fingers carefully in removing the filth from his eyes. When he could see her he grinned, wiped both hands on his shirt (which scarcely served to clean them) and shot his right for her right.

"Pardner, you sure ponied plumb opportune out of a mighty black cloud," he declared as her teeth were revealed in a responsive smile. "I was all set to cross the Divide, honest to snakes! Muchas gracias, muchacha! I come a-soggin' out like a bogged-down longhorn, but I won't, as them critters usually does, start hookin' you as a sign o' gratitude."

SHE LAUGHED, dropped his hand, and commenced the recoiling of her befouled rope. He wanted to know how she happened, so providentially, to be in this vicinity, especially when he had seen her last so far away in another direction.

"A good hoss can take you a long ways in a short time, an' I've got a sure good one," she retorted. "But I know what you mean an' I'll tell you. We started home, pap an' me, after you busted up that rawhidin' play of his. Mad as hell, pap; ain't often a hombre crosses him, let alone hits him, an' lives. He cussed me so fierce that I cut his company a couple miles from the home ranch an' dusted it up

this way to sorta cool off— I've got some parent if I must say it an' not forgettin' he's my father. Just chance I saw you stuck in the quicksand, Mr. Bell; how'd you get there, that's what I'd admire to sabe?"

"Oh, your playful neighbors, the Jolsens," he said cheerfully. "No," Nick wasn't amongst 'em. Say, I met that young man o' yours after you an' your pap hit away, an' I like him, that Nick fella!"

Her face was aglow in an instant. "Clean strain, Nick is, an' you'd wonder at it, havin' the folks he does."

"That's so; but look what you are in spite o' your—disadvantages."

"Well..." Kay could frame him no reply to that. "Tell me," she said presently, "why did the Jolsens jump you? Who was there?"

He said sufficient to make her fully understand as much as he did, using few words. "They humped off at a time when I thought sure they'd bum 'round; I dunno what was the idear of 'em goin'. Couldn't 'a' been afraid o' gettin' caught. Must've took my Sleepy hoss along, an' Lem Jolsen had my gun—by golly!" he broke off, as his eyes encountered the dull reflection of the low-sinking sun from something in the grass beyond the girl's horse, "that looks mighty like the ol' cannon over there."

He strode to the spot, finding he was correct. "Jolsen must 'a' dropped it an' never noticed it when he helped heave me intuh that blasted quicksand," he said, turning back to Kay. He decided his mud-filled holster was not the place for the gun and caught it in his trouser-band; he'd have to clean that holster along with everything else, including himself. "Now, if I had Sleepy..."

And just then Sleepy appeared, as if Dave Bell had a genie working for him. His arms were around the horse's neck the next moment. It made a picture that Kay Frane, herself a great horse-lover, duly appreciated. "Sleepy, eh? He don't look it," she commented.

"Nope, he knows this ain't the time or place; but you oughta see the ol' sonuvagun snoozin' when there's no work on tap—an' that goes for daytime or night. Wonder how he cast loose o' the Jolsen gang."

THIS QUESTION was never answered to Bell's satisfaction, but it was not one which especially needed an answer. He didn't know the bay gelding had run off before the Rafter J bunch quit the vicinity of Halfway Shack and the quicksand. In explanation of Sleepy's return, it should be said that he had shown a clean pair of heels to the Jolsen riders when they started in pursuit of him; finally taken refuge in the mesquite, and after the horsemen swept by on a false scent, the sagacious gelding doubled back to the spot where he and his master had separated. He displayed almost human intelligence in dodging capture (and the pursuers gave him up as lost, with the sun so far down in the west).

"I must be travelin'," Kay Frane said, facing the sunset and gathering her reins on the saddle-horn. "Mr. Bell..."

"Dave, ma'am."

"Right-o, Dave. I want 'pologize for not invitin' you over to the Lazy F for supper, but you know how it'd be —like the welcome they'd hand you on the Rafter J, after mixin' it with Lem Jolsen an' that killer, Clay; sabe?"

"Sure I do, Miss—"

"Kay, an' no 'miss' dressin'."

"Kay, I sabe all right, an' gracias just the same. I won't starve; my saddlebags are carryin' chuck to tide me over. That shack yonder—reckon I'll put up there for tonight."

She told him a little of the shack's history, not meaning to deter him from using it as sleeping quarters—

and she didn't. It was not likely he would be disturbed that night; the Jolsens believed him dead, of course, and Kay could be relied upon not to tattle his whereabouts to the members of her family. Something the girl asked as she gracefully forked her saddle brought a smile to Bell's face, it was so reminiscent of Nick Jolsen, betraying the girl's anxiety for "undercover" doings of the Franes just as the boy had exhibited uneasiness on the Jolsens' account.

"Don't happen to be in the basin on a still hunt, do you, Dave? You're not a Federal officer?"

He denied it, and when she asked the reason for his smile, he told about Nick putting practically the same question.

"No wonder he did!" Kay exclaimed. "The Jolsens are all thieves but him. Oh, if this fightin' an' bloodshed would only stop— I'm sick of it, sick!"

"Why don't you an' Nick run away an' get spliced—an' stay away? Start on your own somewheres else?" he suggested.

But she shook her head, saying nothing. No doubt some foolish notion of loyalty to their quarrelsome families held the young people virtual prisoners and apart in Pintado Basin.

"I suppose I'll see you again, Dave —you'll be campin' out on Lem Jolsen's trail?" she said, lifting the reins, her horse moving forward.

"Quien sabe?" replied the range detective, with a grim smile. Flicking her quirt at him in farewell, Kay was gone over the back-trail.

Bell investigated the Halfway Shack's interior and was satisfied with what he had found. Before darkness had come on he washed his outing shirt and undershirt in the river, above the quicksand; and later, by the flare of a small campfire, scraped the mud and slime off chaps and boots with his stock knife. He hobbled Sleepy in the tall grass and slapped a supper together from the saddlebags' contents. By the time he had eaten and smoked two after-supper cigarettes, he was resolved as to his future course. Pintado Basin was badly in need of a peacemaker to bring order out of chaos and he had elected himself for the star role.

- 3 -

HAVING determined to stay and fight for the happiness of Kay Frane and Nick Jolsen, Dave Bell, next morning, gave some necessary thought to the matter of provisioning himself while in the field against the feudists. He had established headquarters halfway between the home ranches of Lazy F and Rafter J, according to Kay Frane (established, that is, unless one or the other outfit ran him out); and while these were the nearest places where food was obtainable, if he'd owned a gold mine he couldn't have swapped it to the Franes or the Jolsens for a pound of "jerky." They'd want his scalp, and his hide to boot, the minute they laid eyes on him.

Breakfast about cleaned up the food in his saddlebags, but he had plenty of cartridges and tobacco left and these were as important items as belly-timber. He scattered his fire well, cinched the costly California hull on the bay gelding, and fared forth to increase his acquaintance with the country and locate a reliable source of food supply. Perhaps there was a small settlement in the basin, one sizable enough to support a general store; he could have asked Kay the previous night, but Bell hadn't made up his mind what he was going to do when she parted from him.

Bell made no effort to avoid obviously well-traveled trails; his "peace-making" would have to be done with a six-shooter and the sooner he started cleaning up the feudists, the sooner the feud would pass into history; so there was no point in riding wide of possible trouble unless the odds were overwhelming.

The trail he took ran (by accident more than design, for he wasn't altogether certain of his bearings) through an arroyo in what might have been termed the back yard of the Lazy F Ranch, though it did not come within the fenced-up area. Bell halted Sleepy and stood in the stirrups for a survey of the place from the head of the arroyo. He was bound to encounter odds far exceeding his ability to battle single-handed in this quarter; so made no unnecessary show of himself, and even removed his hat as he thrust chin above the arroyo's tangle of brush.

What could be seen at such long range wasn't much, but the number of outbuildings and corrals grouped south and east of the main building gave him some idea of the size of the outfit. Must hire a lot of riders to need such spacious horse-corrals, about twice as many as the average cow spread; but no doubt a third or more of the hands were retained on the payroll just for the purpose of standing off or gun-raiding the enemy outfit across the basin. If the Rafter J was numerically as powerful—and safe betting that it was—Bell certainly had let himself in for the scrap of his scrappy career.

BUT HE WAS grinning as he rode down to the outlet of the arroyo and continued uninterruptedly southward It was approaching high noon when, in quest of a non-existent settlement, he struck a one-horse sort of ranch in the shadow of the basin's southern rim. The term "one-horse" is not intended to convey the meaning that it looked run-down or inferior; but was merely small. House, shed and corral in nice repair, Bell observed, as he loped near enough to take in details. The cowboy detective laid a bet with himself that not more than three hands rode for this iron and the boss himself was one of them.

"You win," said Enoch Morse, the owner, a short time after, when Dave Bell located him on a bench by the the back door, mending a bridle. "There's just exactly three human head on the Cross M, pardner, but we're enough to care for a thousand cattle, more or less. I'm goin' to risk my health to ask if you're here on a Gov'ment roundup?"

"Everybody takes me for a deputy marshal," laughed Bell, a leg curled around the saddle-horn, a cigaret rapidly nearing a smokeable state in his deft brown fingers, the fingers of one hand. "But I figger your question in the regard ain't grounded on fear o' said Federal man-hunters: in other words you don't add to your iron by the method tabbed outlaw since Texas shut down on it in the seventies."

"Runnin'-irons, you mean? Not me, hombre!" Morse was emphatic but smiling, a genuine, face-wide smile. "My herd's on the increase plumb natural—but I can't say the same o' all irons in the basin, even though I'm hatin' to rap neighbors."

Of course the Franes and the Jolsens were meant, and, concluding he could trust this clear-eyed rancher, a man in his early thirties and evidently trying to make the grade honestly in a country controlled by a crooked, killer element, Bell made somewhat of a confidant of Morse and arranged to get provender from the Cross M whenever he should need it. There was no settlement nearer than the town of Rockmound, outside the basin, the cattle-man said. When it came to settling on a price for the food, Morse refused to talk business.

"Clean up them feud-loco fools an' gimme a chance to sell my beef at a fair profit, then I'll shore be repaid a-plenty, Bell."

"Do they underbid you always or have they got the local buyers so froze to the gizzard they'll only buy what's ironed Lazy F or Rafter J?"

"You're right both ways. Take the beef contract at the Fallin' Rock Reservation, up beyond the north rim. I never have a whack at that because the Gov'ment'll take the cheapest stock it can get for the Injuns, an' Franes an' Jolsens is forever slashin' prices on each other; price has got so low, I reckon, that a honest cowman, even if he had a chance to bid, couldn't let his beef go for what the agent would agree to pay. There's a beef issue up at Fallin' Rock either tomorra or next day. I dunno which, Lazy F or Rafter J, is deliverin' cattle for it, but I betcha them boogers been on the swipe from each other, hell to breakfast, all this week."

"Conditions pretty rocky here, I'll say. What's the Indian agent like?"

"Considabul terrible; name's Val Horton, an' I'd as soon trust Walt Frane, or Arn Jolsen behind m' back. Well, I hopes to see you often, Dave," as the last-named gentleman uncurled his leg and put toe in stirrup. "I dunno much about this Nick Jolsen and Kay Frane bein' so almighty different from the rest o' their families; but if you figger so there's likely somethin' to it, for shore I admire your set-up, Mr. Man. Remember where the Cross M's at whenever you want hootch, help or hosses! Before you say s'long I'll stuff them saddlebags—heave 'em here."

FINALLY, Dave Bell departed, extremely glad to have made such a friend. He pondered what Enoch Morse had revealed concerning the fight for cattle contracts and doubted not that conditions at the Navajo Agency were such as to make Uncle Sam take a hand if the facts reached Washington; perhaps the Jolsens were out stealing Lazy F cattle to fill a contract yesterday afternoon, when he encountered them.

After a day spent in getting the lay of the land, Bell returned to the Halfway Shack. He had given the Rafter J a distant once-over and it appeared to be every bit as strong in man-power as the Lazy F. Once he almost ran into a beef cut, being loosely held in a rather secluded pasture by cowpunchers too numerous to tempt the range detective into undertaking a close-up inspection of men and cattle—this was on the Rafter J range. It looked as if the Jolsens had undersold their enemies for the approaching issue.

The Halfway Shack had not been visited during his absence that Bell could discover, and he returned to it while daylight still held and fresh tracks of iron shoes or riding boots would have been visible to his trained eye. A range detective needed to be as skilled a sign-reader as the old-time scouts and Indian-fighters. As a matter of fact, however, enemies were squatting in the neighborhood at that precise moment; to be exact, Walt Frane, two of his sons—Pete and Luke—and a dozen picked gunmen were concealed in the brakes on Bell's side of the river, their horses grouped behind them, hobbled.

But Dave Bell was not the party they planned to ambush—not just then, anyway. When Frane saw and recognized the horseman who rode to the Halfway Shack and dismounted, to walk about and scan the ground before the door, the old pirate was put to the torture of self-control. Yes, hating Bell as he did, it was torture for a man of Walt Frane's violent calibre not to try to cut the stock detective down. The only reason he didn't was because of the distance

from the brakes to the shack; Bell might not be killed by the first shot and "fort" himself in the old Halfway, which so often had been under siege. And Frane was not minded to precipitate a prolonged gunfight which might scare off bigger game. He was expecting a drive of Rafter J cattle, many head of them stolen from the Lazy F herds, to come over this trail any moment. He had been waiting for the herd to appear since four o'clock that afternoon, thinking the Jolsens would take advantage of what daylight they could.

The reason that Dave Bell remained in ignorance of their presence—until "hell-on-the-Gila" broke loose, after nightfall—was due to the shrewdness of young Pete Frane, who was in a fair way to becoming a worse nuisance in Pintado Basin than his father. Pete had advised against going near the Halfway Shack when his party arrived, late that afternoon, to belly-flop in the brakes. The wary Jolsens might figure, from past performance, on an ambush being laid at the old line-camp, and hold the herd down-trail to obviate all risk of a stampede until they had thoroughly investigated. Thus, in substance, young Pete.

Walt Frane had admitted there was wisdom in what his son said; therefore Bell gathered mesquite for a fire and cooked his evening meal before the cabin door in total and blissful ignorance. The Frane party might have sent one of their number—a man expert with a knife—cat-footing over to carve Bell into neat bits, now that darkness had descended, were they not expecting the belated herd to show up momentarily. Constantly they were lying ear to the ground; and at length were rewarded by the sounds they craved to hear.

BELL, POSSESSING the exceptionally keen senses of the outdoor man, noticed a slight trembling of the earth beneath his feet and did just as the men in the brakes were doing; he knew the vibrations to be caused by the tread of marching cattle instantly. Had it been a herd of horses coming, instead, he would have known from the gait, quick and light, where this was plodding and heavy—you can't fool a cowboy about such things.

He had been on the point of squatting to eat—the coffee was boiling and throwing off an aroma to tease a man's appetite—but this was one meal he'd have to pass up. He poured the contents of the pot on the flames sorrowfully and scattered the embers well, his mind racing. A trail herd! Must be the cattle he had seen in that isolated pasture, over Rafter J way. The Jolsens were en route to the Navajo Agency! The thing for him to decide was whether he intended staying here and running the risk of discovery by the hard-baked outfit, or changing base to some more remote locality, out of the path of the coming herd.

In the end he stuck to the cabin; he didn't believe he could catch up Sleepy, browsing knee-high in grass near the river bank, saddle him, and get a head start before the point riders of the herd's convoy shoved in the clearing. Perhaps the Halfway Shack wouldn't interest them at all tonight; anyhow, he'd take a chance on escaping their hostile notice. The darkness would ably assist in sheltering both Bell and his horse from unfriendly eyes. Though there was a moon up, it was only in the first quarter and did not shed much light. The cowboy detective dodged into the shack, shut the door, then lingered by the single front window, the glass of which had long ago been demolished.

Steadily nearer drew the clacking clamor of horns and hoofs; and the sound of men singing, not altogether musically. Two riders put in a dim appearance before the cattle were visible

to the watchful eyes of Dave Bell; in the brakes by the river the human tigers prepared to pounce. The right, ripe moment had not yet arrived. They knew the herd numbered approximately five hundred and when the leaders had passed the ambush and were almost at the brink of the river, above the quicksand, where a safe crossing might be made, the Jolsens would have cause to regret trying to clinch that agency contract by a night drive.

Of the two horsemen who entered the clearing first, riding point for the herd, one was far from ill-disposed toward Dave Bell. He had been told by a certain young woman that day that Bell was as likely to be found at the Halfway Shack as anywhere else, and knowing the men he was riding with would be certain to scout the cabin before punching the herd to the river crossing, wary of a bush-up or other devilment staged by the Franes, the young man in question had insisted that he be chosen as one of the point riders.

Certainly the Franes and Bell wouldn't be hanging around the old Halfway Shack at one and the same time, but the young man was firmly of the opinion that Walt Frane would not suspect the Jolsens of stealing a march on him thus. The fact of the matter was that Val Horton, the Indian agent at Falling Rock, had of late shown a preference for Lazy F beef and not because the Jolsens wouldn't slash prices as low as the Franes, or lower. Arn Jolsen thought a girl was the reason for it, the same girl his son, Nick, was "fool enough" to chase after. So the Jolsens decided on a night drive to the Navajo Reservation—meaning to get there before the Franes could shove a herd over the trail—and make Mr. Horton purchase from the Rafter J for this issue, even if it were necessary to persuade him with a gun. It was a neat plan, which might have worked successfully for the Jolsens, but for the efficient spying of Frane hirelings.

"MATT, STAY here an' hold my hoss, so's I'll have somethin' to beat it on should they be any Franes holed up yonder," said Nick Jolsen to the other point rider as they halted fifty or sixty yards from the silent Halfway Shack. He tossed his reins to the cowpuncher and slid to the ground. "Should fireworks start, you hammer t'wards me hell-for-leather with the cayuse; but, hell I don't reckon any of 'em's hidin' there."

When Dave Bell saw the lithe-figured range rider making tracks cabinward he was not overly pleased. A set-to with one man was nothing to cause Bell's heart to skip a beat, nor did the prospect thus affect him; but he was made uneasy by the almost certain knowledge that a fight with one of the trail drivers meant he would have to fight them all—fight or run. And the time for taking to his heels or to horse might be said to have passed long since. He had pocketed himself. Hope that the approaching enemy would not ferret him out wasn't to be harbored for a moment. There was absolutely no place in the cabin for a full-grown man to conceal himself.

The notion of barring the door and opening fire through the shattered window occurred to Bell; but somehow the outline of the shadow man reminded him of Nick Jolsen, and he stuck to his original post until the newcomer's spur chains were rattling almost at the threshold. Bell's gun was in his hand as he moved at speed and with a phantom's silence backward from the window, into the pitch-blackness of the center of the room. He fully believed that the man whose hand was now on the latch-string was young Jolsen, though he had seen Nick but once and rather briefly. Moreover, unless Nick was a changeable sort, Bell

should have nothing to fear from him personally. But a trifle of uncertainty in his mind caused the range detective to balance his gun ready for a throw-down when the thin moonlight sprayed the middle section of the cabin's interior and Nick stood boldly on the doorsill, holding to the latch-string.

"Bell, you in here? It's Nick Jolsen, if you ain't reckernized me before this."

"You bet I'm around, Nick," retorted Dave, lowering his gun at the friendly note in the other's voice; and perceiving no good reason to muzzle-line a man who put himself so entirely at another's mercy by making a perfect silhouette, Nick thereby evincing a more perfect trust than Bell could profess.

"Well, listen, amigo: just shrink intuh a corner—if you ain' in one a'ready—so's when I strike a match that guy, Matt, with the hosses yonder, won't see your shadder through the door or winder." Nick's right arm moved, but Bell knew he was going after matches in his vest, not a gun. "A lady we both admires put me wise that you might be here"; and Nick uttered a low-voiced and sketchy explanation while Bell retired to a corner, where he would cast no telltale shadow.

THE MATCH flared in Nick's fingers and he came on into the shack, returning Dave Bell's amiable smile when they could see each other. "What you lazyin' around these parts for, cowboy?"

"Well, I might be out to get your Uncle Lem's hair—would you blame me?"

Nick shook his head. "Unc is a plumb savage customer; he reckons you're under the quicksand uh course; so do all of 'em, 'ceptin' me, an' shore your secret's dead with li'l Nickolas. Glad Kay was around in time to give you a hand with her rope..."

"All right, Nick?" bawled the puncher out in the clearing. He was getting impatient. With match alight, young Jolsen should be able to see at a glance whether the cabin held enemies or not. Indeed, when Nick was able to get as far as the door without starting a six-shooter or rifle demonstration, it was pretty conclusive evidence, to the mind of Matt, the other point rider, that none of the Frane faction were hiding out there tonight.

"See you again, Bell; that fella'll be ridin' up here if I don't go." Nick snapped the match through the doorway and followed after it, closing the door with a slam.

Bell swung to the window, saw him stalk to meet the restless cowboy coming across the clearing, mounted and leading Jolsen's mount. Nick's figure became one with the outline of his horse and the two scouting point riders hit the backtrack to draw the herd on, assured that the coast was clear of enemies.

Soon the leaders of the herd were streaming at a fair road-gait past the hiding place of Dave Bell; the cabin stood off a good hundred yards from the cattle trail, so that after the longhorns had gone by a certain point, the cowboy detective was unable to see them. Singing riders drifted along on the flank of which he had a view—the swing men, posted at long intervals to discourage straying and hustle the marchers when speed was wanted.

Suddenly, above the noise of the cattle, rang the yells of wild men, almost drowned as numerous six-guns blurted a broadside. Bell heard a shout, louder than all the rest, "Ambush! the damn Franes!"

IT HAPPENED when the last of the cattle and the drag riders were crossing Bell's vision; he saw the right arm of these horsemen dive down legward, then swing high, the moon striking dull light from blued steel. The nervous tail-end longhorns wheeled from the straight trail in a flash, following the example of the equally spooky longhorns ahead of them, which Bell could not see, and

piled at top speed along an oblique course. The range detective imagined they would crash into the cabin, and quickly jerked open the door and sprang outside. But the swift-charging cattle missed the corner of the Halfway Shack by many yards; they were headed for the quicksand behind it, the quicksand and certain destruction—if they weren't headed off!

And heading off, in this instance, was a human impossibility. The Frane party had taken care not to tip their hand until the cattle were certain to be easily stampeded in the "right" direction. Hard riding and hard shooting on the part of the Rafter J riders could not prevent the herd from rushing pellmell to its doom in the deadly sands; indeed, the horsemen would do well to escape a similar fate themselves, for the sudden bolting of the longhorns caught many, on point and swing, in positions of extreme peril.

Arn Jolsen himself was bossing the drive and the cards had decreed that he should be one of the humans to suffer extinction along with the herd; riding swing on the flank nearest the quicksand, old Arn faced a solid, moving phalanx of terrible horns of ten-foot spread per pair as the Franes' gunplay threw the cattle into a crazy panic and off-trail.

The old rustler, feudist and badman lunged sidewise in the saddle, pumping his Colt furiously, as he was driven towards the quicksand, but he would have needed a Pegasus between his legs to outride either wheeling flank of the frenzied cow brutes, and well did he realize the utter futility of trying to gain safe ground to right or left. He was prodded on by horned death from behind—and ahead lay the equally lethal quicksand! For once in his life the old villain knew fear, but he rode to his doom with gun spouting to the explosion of the last cartridge.

Arn's brother, Lem, was another Rafter J man thus cut off from escape; in fact, the avalanche of cattle pushed him and his horse into the quicksand ahead of Arn. As he struggled in the sucking mud, still astride his pony, Lem Jolsen thought, for one wild moment, of Dave Bell, whom he believed to have preceded him to the suffocating depths by many hours.

It was not pleasant matter for reflection at Lem's own eleventh hour; and the faces of more dead men than Bell—men who had not escaped as did the latter—rose up before Lem's mind's eye to torture him—but not for long.

Arn's horse came leaping off the low bank, landing, with his rider, not far from the sinking Lem; and the brothers and a hired gunman, cut off like themselves, were together and fighting a losing fight against the gripping muck when the herd tumbled in on top of them. If the hungry maw of the quicksand never had been filled before, it should be glutted this night, with three men and three horses in it and cattle to the number of five hundred piling in.

Dave Bell was slipping about like a ghost, and not always in the vicinity of the Halfway Shack, to view the disaster from different angles. He wondered then if Nick Jolsen had been run into the muck when the herd turned, learning later that Nick hadn't. Both point riders, as the cattle broke bounds, were close enough to the river bank to reach water in a brace of leaps, above the sand blockade. A few cattle followed them into the river and swam alongside the ponies, but the rest headed to their death. Swimming their horses in a wide circle, Nick and his saddle-mate returned to the danger zone, where gunfire was raking the night with deafening sound and murky lightning. They clambered up the bank and with six-shooters spitting, and sought to ride that roaring gantlet of Frane gunmen and rejoin what remained of the drive crew. They succeeded!

It was none of Bell's fight and he did not enter into it; let dog eat dog

here—he would be spared the trouble of accounting for just so many as fell in this set-to. He hoped for but one man to come through unscathed, Nick Jolsen, but was none too sanguine that the boy would, knowing where Nick had been riding when the ambush was sprung.

THE RANGE detective was at a loss to understand his own immunity from attack; he realized that the Frane party must have been hiding in the brakes when he returned to the shack before sunset, and why they had refrained from making short work of him—or from trying to, at least—was unfathomable. He considered that he had had a run of unparalleled luck.

Careful not to expose himself to stray bullets, he watched with intense interest as the shadowy Jolsen horsemen attempted to rally and shell the Franes out of the thicket; which was a line of endeavor doomed to failure, even though Arn Jolsen had included more men in the drive than were necessary for handling five hundred head of long-horns on trail. The doubled force was the result of forethought; Arn never knew when or where his Lazy F enemies might strike. But they had outguessed and bested him, after all.

The Franes lost men, no doubt, when the cold-nerved Jolsen forces, recovering from the shock of surprise, tried to retaliate for the loss of boss and herd and ride down their bushed-up foes with Colts belching a withering fire; but the advantage lay with the ambushers and they halted the charging horsemen by their own accurate gunplay a dozen yards from the thicket's edge, then turned and routed them. And when the Jolsens were retreating down the cattle trail, Walt Frane ordered his own men to horse.

Pursuit. A running fight in the weak moonlight, with the hoofbeats receding rapidly into the distance. Walt Frane was hell-bent on wiping out the Jolsen men if it could be accomplished; never had he caught them in such a cute trap and while he had them on the hip, so to speak, was the ripe moment for throwing them and so hard that the outfit could not recover.

Dave Bell emerged from the shadows and stood hip-shot in the moon's feeble rays, rubbing chin thoughtfully as he listened to the dwindling sounds of gunfire and racing ponies. It looked as if old Frane had played a trump card for undisputed rule in Pintado Basin; yet, if there was a Jolsen left living after this night's bloody work, the house of Frane had better be extra careful of the scalps beneath its roof-tree or they would be drying in the smoke; a Jolsen would be twice as dangerous and desperate a foe as heretofore.

The cowboy detective felt certain that the field of battle would not be revisited that night. He boldly scouted the trail which most recently had resounded to the thump of horses' hoofs, and explored the brakes; he was looking and listening for dying men who might have need of a drink of water in their last moments, or be grateful for a folded coat beneath their heads. He would perform such service for his worst enemy.

BUT, THOUGH he encountered no less than five spread-eagled figures, whether Frane or Jolsen men he could not say, there was not a spark of life in any one of them. Besides the human toll taken, two horses stretched, still warm but lifeless, across the trail. Not to mention several trampled cows, their bulk beaten almost flat by the crazy hoofs which had passed over them when they went down in the stampede.

In addition to these dead things, the helpless cattle in the quicksand which had not yet been drawn to the depths and suffocated, completed the nightmarish effect of the whole with

their frightened mooing and bawling. Bell wanted to get some sleep that night, for there was no telling what violent activities the morrow held in store for him; but he couldn't rest with that terrible din in his ears.

His mind made up, the cowboy detective stripped the cartridge-belts from two of the fallen rustlers and went out to the edge of the quicksand, beyond the cabin. The moonlight revealed a hellish sight in the hundreds of struggling animals, and it was strong enough to render the heads of the strugglers fair targets for a sure marksman.

Dave Bell drew his gun and speedily emptied the six chambers, leveling as many heads on the quicksand's stormy surface. Reloading with shells from one of the rustler's belts, he began again, on different targets. Many cattle sank, of course, before he could get around to them; but likewise many were spared a death by slow suffocation by receiving, between the horns, a merciful bullet from the gun of the humanitarian.

He went back to the trail for other belts when he had used up every cartridge in the two he originally fetched to the brink of the death-trap. It was the part of wisdom for him to save his own ammunition for eventualities of the uncertain future. When he snapped open his gun for the last time that night, ejecting the empty shells and allowing the blued steel iron to cool before thumbing in a load of .45's from his own belt, the wide-branching horns had been leveled, their fruitless, agonized tossing stilled forever, and there was silence, of an unpleasant sort.

While the almost steady crashing of Bell's gun could have been heard several miles, he doubted that it would reach the ears of Franes or Jolsens; in all probability the latter had been chased by the former all the way to the Rafter J home ranch, and if that were so, the range detective's gunwork at the Halfway Shack would have gone unnoticed.

As he quit the verge of the quicksand, nearly tripping himself over the discarded cartridge-belts, Bell threaded up the river bank in search of Sleepy. While he did not anticipate having inimical night visitors, Bell reckoned it only prudent to keep his horse nearby in case the unexpected happened. He did not turn in, there (leaving the cabin door wide open when he did), until he had captured Sleepy, made skittish and rather distrustful by so much powder burning, and staked the horse at the corner of the shack. He hadn't eaten, but his appetite, somehow, had left him.

- 4 -

DAVE BELL was up with the sun and breakfasted heartily. And he had no more than finished eating when the vibration of the ground foretold the advance of another trail herd over the very route by which the Jolsens had driven their hapless beef cut during the hours of darkness.

It would be easy for the range detective to figure out that this second herd would be in charge of the Franes. Having disposed of its enemies' stock as well as a number of the enemy, the Lazy F was on the way to fill the agency contract with a herd of its own—or so-called. This trail past the Halfway Shack must be the only one to the Falling Rock Reservation, or at any rate, the shortest.

Perhaps the Lazy F meant to recover its dead, too. Bell had thought of lugging those corpses to the quicksand this morning, to cheat wolf and buzzard, but was perfectly willing that Walt Frane's outfit should do their

own interring of comrades who had turned moccasins up.

It didn't take the stock detective long to decide against remaining within or about the cabin this time. The Franes knew well enough that he had been there the night before, but had not molested him for reasons unknown; he came near the truth when he surmised that they regarded the Jolsens as a bite plenty big for one chew. This morning, however, there would be no Jolsens to divert their attention and Bell's only safety obviously lay in removing himself from the foreground.

But he did not go far. Standing in the brakes beside Sleepy, the cowboy could observe, through interstices in the brushwood, much of what took place roundabout the shack and on a certain section of the cattle trail.

Burly Walt Frane and a younger man, who resembled him—this was Pete Frane—first came within the vision of the wily Bell. Afraid that Sleepy might whinny at the proximity of other horses, Bell was squeezing the bay gelding's nostrils with his left hand, his gun dangling in his right. The Franes rode directly to the cabin, with guns drawn, perhaps expecting to find the stock detective asleep inside, for anyone who had been within earshot of last night's bombardment might well be excused for sleeping past sunrise to catch up.

They flung down softly from the saddle and Bell grinned to note their extreme caution in pulling the latchstring and entering. Out they piled in a moment, the old pirate roaring, "Well, he was here last night, awright; you seen him plain as me, Pete."

The younger man agreed, then bent to feel the scattered ashes of Bell's breakfast fire; Pete announced them warm and for sixty ticklish seconds the Association rider thought there would be an attempt to beat the brush for him.

"Traveled when he heard us comin," growled old Frane. "Well, he showed sense there, 'cause if ever I meet up with him again, he's my meat. Mebbe he ain't far away from here, Pete, an' mebbe he is, but we can't take the time to hunt for him now. We'll be late at the Agency as 'tis. Let's go drag them corpses over to the sand 'fore the herd gits here."

"Right-oh!" assented Pete, and mounted.

AND DRAG the corpses they did, literally, hitching their lariats to the lifeless bodies and hauling them quicksand-ward. They could not all have been Lazy F men, but the Franes had the decency to bury all alike. They also dragged the dead steers and horses to one side of the trail by the same method, and the reason for this was that they feared the carcasses might cause uneasiness in their own herd. There are times when anything will start a stampede, even an inanimate object, if some "spooky" steer happens to look at it cross-eyed.

Soon afterward the cattle drifted along the trail and, through a constantly shifting haze of dust, Dave Bell gazed upon filing "Lazy F" brands for twenty minutes or so. Not until the last of the herd had swum the river did the cowboy detective think of leaving the coppice. When he did he was forking the handsome California saddle and all set to run the trail out. He was going to be on hand at the beef issue and see what was what with his own eyes. He had a hankering to meet Val Horton, the agent, described as "considabul terrible" by Enoch Morse, of the Cross M.

Not too closely did Bell trail the trail drivers; the cattle were being punched into a big corral when Bell arrived within a mile of the Falling Rock headquarters building; the corral had need to be spacious for the longhorns must have totaled four hundred at the lowest estimate and to the last head they were shoved inside the

enclosure by the Lazy F cowboys.

The Navajos had moved in en masse from the edges of the reservation, ahorse and awheel. There were almost as many battered Fords on the agency grounds as ponies; the redman and his squaw did not much resemble the Indians of Buffalo Bill's time, except as to features and coloring. Their attire was that of the civilized white, ill-fitting, second-hand clothing. Many of them wore sombreros, others old black slouch hats; the women no head covering whatever. Hardly a blanket in the crowd, though this does not mean they had ceased to weave them—for the tourist trade.

Bell was not able to remark these details, of course, until he had cut down the greater part of that mile referred to. There were a lot of gaping whites from the neighboring town of Rockmound and even a few cowpunchers not of the Lazy F or any Basin outfit gathered to see the "fun," and the Association man felt that he could approach and mingle with this gathering without fear of being spotted by his enemies—if he were careful. Walt Frane's men had their work cut out for them. The Navajos were improving their opportunity to show off before the white assemblage, racing autos against ponies. Because of the poor general condition of the "lizzies," the horses did not always lose.

Hairpinning his horse at the rear of the lookers-on, with hat-brim pulled well forward, Dave Bell had been watching the Indian show-offs for perhaps half an hour when Walt Frane rode from the corral to the Agency building, dismounted and disappeared inside. When he reappeared, two men were with him whom Bell surmised were Val Horton, the agent, and an assistant. The latter carried a handful of what appeared, at the distance, to be pasteboard tags; these were the numerically stamped tickets which the selected heads of family groups among the Navajos would present at the corral for their allotment of beef.

The races ended abruptly as the agent, crowned by a white Stetson of finest felt, stepped forth from his office; the Indians needed no megaphone announcer to concentrate them in a mob at the foot of the agency steps. The tickets were passed around and the group leaders at once sought ponies, pattered toward the corral and lined up adjacent to it to await the calling of numbers. The mob milled, moved nearer these abreast-ranged horsemen.

THE INDIAN AGENT, his assistant and Walt Frane backed mounts and loped through a lane made for them by the red mob, halted at the left of the corral gate, and the sub-agent, after a conference over the fence with Lazy F punchers inside, yelled, "Number One!" A Navajo pony rider quit the lineup and at the same time the bucks and squaws comprising Number One's "group" broke from the crowd afoot and tracked in his wake. The corral bars came down and mounted cowpunchers hazed a hesitant longhorn into the open. Once outside, it tried to elude the whooping group which awaited it. Contriving to dodge even the ponybacker, the longhorn led its would-be slaughterers a merry run until one of them brought the animal flopping down with a rifle bullet. Then the butcher-knives were busy.

Ere this, group "Number Two" had been called and another Lazy F beef turned loose in their midst. Sometimes the reds reserved the slaughtering for another day, possibly having on hand sufficient provender for immediate use, and bunch Number Two was an instance of this, for they herded the lone dogie off alive. Claim tickets Numbers Three and Four were called, and then something out of the ordinary happened.

Bell's gaze had centered mostly on

the corral and the white men working there; the Navajo and the cattle did not interest him. Not once was his head turned to follow the flight of a longhorn trying to evade the holder of a ticket for its life; he had seen too many beef issues to consider one of them worth watching for itself alone.

But he pricked up his ears and his glance grew more intent at a sudden commotion in the corral; the dust swirled mightily as the cattle milled; then, through the dropped bars of the gateway bolted, not one, but four longhorns, bucking and bawling like critters fed on loco-weed.

The Indians scattered from the vicinity of the big enclosure, the agent, his assistant and Walt Frane spurred away. Bell saw Lazy F cowboys appear at intervals on the top rail of the corral, straddling it; they had leaped there from pitching saddles out of harm's way. The bars to the only opening in the big pen were aground, there was nothing to prevent the alarmed impounded herd from stampeding after the locoed four—and the herd departed!

The eyes of Dave Bell narrowed to slits; he thought he knew what was going on and that appearances were deceiving. If the Lazy F got ahorse and headed the stampede, he was wrong, but if they didn't... He waited tensely and watched, not the fleeing herd, which was high-tailing over the trail which it had traversed to the Agency, but the cowmen at the corral —and the agent, Horton. The excited clamor of the Navajos and the scarcely less noisy utterances of the white gathering did not interfere with his concentration. The several cowpunchers among the lookers-on started up their ponies to ride the stampede trail and "lend a hand"; Bell imagined that it would be healthier for them if they took no part in proceedings. The Franes wouldn't take kindly to any helpful interference in the "accident."

It seemed that the Lazy F cowpunchers were mighty slow getting to their horses and away. Perhaps nobody noticed it but Bell and the men concerned in the scheme, for there was a scheme in the wind.

"Them cattle," thought Bell, "are hotfootin' straight back to the basin; an' if the Franes don't spur up some, the critters will be home a day ahead of 'em."

This mental observation was occasioned by the "lame wolf" gait of the riders now stringing after the hard-rolling dust clouds, raising some clouds of their own which, to those who could see no farther than the end of nose, made it look as if they were traveling at speed. Bell was not deceived; he had surmised correctly, first rattle.

With the Lazy F outfit cleared out to the last man. Bell felt that he could move about with less circumspection than heretofore and so gave Sleepy a light quirt-cut, riding away from the arguing crowd of Rockmounders and over toward the great empty corral. The man with the white sombrero, whom he supposed to be Val Horton, had, ere this, ridden back to the Agency building. He now stood on the porch and was trying to shout down the Navajos who clustered at the steps waving uncollected tickets and demanding beef for them. Finally Horton could make himself heard and although his words carried to the ears of Dave Bell, they were in the Indian tongue and the range detective didn't sabe Navajo. But he reckoned he could pretty nearly bull's-eye with a guess the import of that speech, getting a cue from the actions of the Navajos. They were not at all satisfied.

In substance, Horton probably had said: "What can I do about it? It is not my fault if the cattle stampede and cannot be rounded up. You saw the cowboys try to stop them. None of

you are starving, there are no empty bellies among you. The White Father at Washington has not given me enough money to buy more cattle now; if these cattle do not come back you will have to wait until next beef issue."

And, of course, the Lazy F herd wouldn't come back; it would be thrown in with the rest of the brand on the Frane's range and doubtless be resold at a later date. When a crooked agent and crooked cattlemen, or other contractors, were in collusion there was no end of the ways in which the Indians might be defrauded.

Such rank work as he had just witnessed, particularly since one of the plotters was a trusted official of Uncle Sam, made Bell red-hot where he knotted his bandanna. He intended having an unpleasant word or two with Mr. Horton when the Indians cleared away from the front of the agency.

The crowd began to dissipate when he was halfway to the corral and he noted the black scowls of the bucks and squaws, who knew they were being cheated but were at a loss how to go about righting their wrongs.

Bell's gaze quit the shuffling figures and swept the ground in front of his slow-pacing horse. It was purely accident that he shifted his eyes at just this moment; but he saw something which engaged his interest and caused him to lean from the saddle, right arm at full stretch.

Erect in the saddle once more, he looked at the object he had picked up, a lobe of spiky cactus, beaten to pulp by the cloven hoofs which had passed over it; there was little doubt that a keen knife had severed this piece from the parent plant. Looking about him, Dave Bell espied three other such pieces of cactus trampled into the earth, and he collected all, slipping them in his coat pocket.

He now understood the reason for the frantic bawling and bucking of those apparently demented longhorns which had precipitated the stampede; a chunk of sharp-spined cactus had been tucked under the tail of each, falling to the ground very soon after through the violent antics of the cattle; but the mischief aimed at by the Lazy F boys had been done by then.

When Bell looked toward the agency again, Val Horton and his white hat had disappeared indoors. Straight for the porch headed the cowboy detective, his expression sardonic. Tying up at the hitching-bar, Bell trailed his spurs up the steps and into the office. He entered boldly, as one who had the right to be there and who was bent on transacting important business, which was quite true.

The office was empty as he stepped into it, but the man with the white sombrero appeared through a doorway to the right almost at once, wiping a sleeve across his mouth as if the jingling spurs of the intruder had interrupted a drink.

"Howdy?" said Bell, in not the pleasantest tone of greeting. "You the agent, Val Horton?"

White Sombrero nodded, showing some resentment of the other's tone and peering at the wind-roughened brown face beneath the forward tilted Stetson. "You one of the Lazy F men?" he hazarded.

"Nary an' not any, I ain't cussed enough. Say, Horton, I reckon some higher-up of Uncle Sam's would've enjoyed watchin' the show you an' Frane put on a while ago—it sure tickled me! I've heard o' stampedin' beef issues before, but never saw it put over till today—an' you used a new trick, hangin' hunks o' cactus under them dogies' tails. Usually there's a passel o' rogue critters in the beef bunch to start things hummin', or so I been told."

VAL HORTON's face was livid and his eyes afire. "What the hell do you mean—and who are you?" He swept the right side of his coat back

from the holstered Colt on his thigh and his hand dropped upon the stock; it was a motion swift as lightning and probably Val Horton was just as quick on the draw.

"You let that gun be, Horton, or I'll rake your guts to slivers before you can smell smoke!" Dave Bell made no move to unlimber his own shooting-iron; he pushed his hat off his eyes with his left hand, so that the Indian agent would get the full benefit of his menacing expression. Bell could look like the devil's right bower when he wanted to and this was a time that he did. He thrust that left hand into a side pocket of his coat as Horton "let his gun be" and stood irresolute; he produced the pieces of cactus and flung them on the agent's desk, hard-by. "There's evidence I know what I'm palaverin' about! It's a dang wonder the Navajos don't hamstring you for such cheatin'—reckon they would if they thought they could get away with it!"

Val Horton was so infuriated by this stranger's audacity that, for a moment, he couldn't speak; there was suspicion and something very akin to dread in his heart, though he was not a coward ordinarily. Who was this hard-faced fellow in puncher clothes with a puncher dialect and eyes that evidently missed nothing—some agent of the government spying on him?

"Who are you?"

"Well, I ain't Cupid exactly," retorted the range detective; "but I am a kind of heart specialist, at that," he added, repressing a grin. "I knows one cure for all bad hearts an' I totes the instrument in leather here. No matter who I am, Mr. Val Horton, I'm ontuh your game an' I'm recommendin' that you mend your ways before it's too late."

"Threatening me?"

"Take it as you like; I'm a full-growed man an' so are you. Lemme advise you to quit doin' business with the Lazy F—though I don't reckon they'll be in business theirselves much longer—an' try Enoch Morse's beef, for your own health's sake! You know Enoch? Nice fella."

"Oh, just advertising the Cross M brand, are you?" said the agent, unable to deny the evidence of the trampled cacti and likewise at fault in getting the other's true measurements. He was crazy to heave a gun on Bell, but afraid the latter would beat him to the trigger-drag, unless—unless he could be made to fall for a whiskered trick. The agent lifted his burning glance past the resolute figure of Bell, and said in an altered tone, as if addressing someone at the door, "You Injuns keep out of here; I'm talking business with this gent."

Dave Bell grinned widely. "Ask your Injuns yonder to holler 'boo' at me. Nope, ain't nobody there, you thievin' sneaky kiote! Today's not my day for bein' fooled. Answerin' your last question, I am boostin' Cross M stock; I'd like to see that Morse fella make the grade. His beef will cost more than Lazy F or Rafter J stuff, I reckon, but not more than what Uncle Sam is ready an' willin' to pay. Uh course, there won't be no rake-off for you, an' I misdoubt Enoch would lower hisself to stampede a issue; but it's up to you to turn honest sudden or turn in your resignation—no, I'm not sayin' who I am or what, but, fella, you think hard! Adios!"

Bell began to back toward the front door, while the Indian agent stood as if riveted through the boot-heels to the floor. The cowboy detective wondered where Horton's assistant had gone as he oozed onto the porch; he was making a fine target of himself if the fellow was inclined to the practise of sniping. As soon as he was past the door-frame, Bell whirled, looking in front and to the right and left of him. There was no enemy lurking on the porch or near it.

Standing thus, with shoulders

pressed against the wall of the building, he detected the sound of softly tinkling footsteps through the open door of the office, which announced that the agent had not given up the idea of trying to "get" his somewhat mysterious visitor. The Association rider was running a bluff on Val Horton; Dave Bell had no real authority to interfere in the business of a government agent, even though it were not being honestly conducted. It seemed that the bluff was going to work, but not exactly as Bell had intended; in other words, Val Horton considered him a spy in the pay of the Department of Indian Affairs at Washington, posing as a cowpunch, and was eager to raise the "spy's" hair rather than to "turn honest," as Bell had expressed it.

THE CLINK of Bell's spurs as he walked along the porch—backward and facing the door—lured on Mr. Horton and suddenly he bulked in the doorway, his pistol out and lined for a quick, fatal shot. The range detective's moving feet stilled. His own walnut-handled gun was aimed from hip-level and there was a sardonic grin on his countenance.

For a full moment the men faced each other in silence, then Bell advanced with the remark: "I knowed, just as sure as sheep stink, that you'd try some backhand play. Gimme that shootin'-iron; you ain't trustworthy'n a ten-rattle side-winder."

Again Mr. Horton had nothing to say, but his silence was of the kind known as eloquent and the predominant emotion it expressed was desperation. He had the evil eye that moment, had Mr. Horton. But he didn't attempt to fire his gun or cling to it when Bell reached and closed the fingers of his left hand on the barrel, jerking it sharply forward and down.

"There'll be more to this, damn you!"

"Sure," agreed Bell, cheerfully. "You best shuffle inside, sink a slug o' whisky, an' begin that hard thinkin' I advised."

He turned and went down the Agency steps, pausing on the bottom one to wheel and say, "I'm droppin' this gun over at the corral; by the time you can put your hands on it again, I'll be plumb out o' range." Then he went onto the hitching-bar, slipped the knot of Sleepy's reins and rose to the leather. Rapidly he rode corralward, looked back at the figure in the office doorway as he flipped Horton's gun to the sod; and then, with a flirt of the hand, pushed on around the rudely circular pen.

Not ten minutes after Bell had disappeared from sight, and while the agent was feeding his violent humor with "sure-shock" whiskey, two derelict specimens of humanity sifted into the office, dusting ragged chaps with double-thonged quirts.

Cash Beaston and One-eye Jones. The agent could scarcely credit his eyesight—and good fortune—when he saw them shamble in upon him, grins spreading in a growth of whiskers on the face of each.

He plied them with white mule—he didn't drink that kind of stuff himself—put yellow boys in a grimy paw of each and set them on the trail of Bell. As craven hearts they had slouched into the agency; as firewater warriors they spraddled forth to their waiting ponies. Easily the renegades picked up the hoofprints of Sleepy and pursued them at a rattling gait, battered Winchester repeaters across their saddle-horns.

NOW, WHITE mule is an uncertain kicker; not all men are struck alike by the lightning. While it had the effect of maintaining uppermost the worst in Beaston and Jones—and rendering them forgetful of sheriffs and other lesser law-dogs—it also moved them to song. They never thought of being cautious, but split

their lungs along the trail like a brace of wind-broken saddle troubadours. The marked man of "White Sombrero" heard them coming sometime before he saw the minstrels.

"Val Horton sure has set his heart on havin' me rubbed out!" grinned Dave Bell.

He was riding toward a string of three buttes when he first became aware of pursuers. Behind him was a long ridge and the singing ruffians were down the far slope, coming up to the crest, where they could not see him. He touched up Sleepy and the bay gelding streaked for the buttes, arriving in the shadow of the foremost miniature hill two minutes ahead of the trail tramps' appearance on the ridge-top. Bell reined in his horse at the butte's base, slid from the saddle and peered around the bulging shoulder of vermilion rock.

Like two hell-bent whirlwinds, One-eye and Cash were tearing down the ridge-slope which faced the butte. They had left off yelling trail songs and were whooping—just whooping. Bell guessed why.

"Seems like everybody's got the bushwhackin' habit in this dang country, so I might as well fall in line." murmured the cowboy detective. He took special note of the rifles brandished by Beaston and Jones, and was glad he had not been caught unawares in the open; he, himself, couldn't have done any accurate gunwork at over fifty yards.

Bell had no intention of killing these trail tramps, although they undoubtedly sought his life. In the first place, they were crazy drunk and unaccountable for their actions; in the second, they were but the tools of another man who would rather risk their hides than his own.

Unstrapping the rope from his saddle, Bell spread a wide noose, tossed his hat aside and circumspectly projected his head 'round the base of the butte to ascertain how much nearer the ruffians had come.

They had covered quite a bit of ground since he last gazed upon them, though it had been a matter of but two or three minutes. Such hell-for-leather riding!—and yells fit to stiffen the hair of a toupee! The seasoned plainsman, Dave Bell, grinned wider than ever as he drew back his head, shaking his loop full spread upon the sun-baked earth. Clatter! clatter! clatter! pounded the pony hoofs, like unshod lightning. The yelling welled louder; Bell crouched, his grin gone, watching tensely for pony legs—they whisked into view, working furiously—the over-quirted little animals had become infected with their riders' stampeded spirits.

EXPERTLY Bell performed a trick which brings handclapping from the rodeo crowds; the broad noose leaped off the ground as if it were itself alive and snared the forelegs of both ponies, well above the fetlock. That portion of the lariat held by Bell surged taut across a hip braced to withstand shock and in a twinkling of the celebrated eye, ponies and riders were floundering in a dust veil of their own creation.

Gun gripped in his right hand, a small rock in his left, Bell leaped into the haze of alkali to complete the job so favorably begun. One-eye and Cash had just escaped being pinned under their falling ponies; but a miss was as good as a mile to these leather and rawhide beings and, quickly as Bell charged in, following the jerk-down, the trail tramps were scrambling erect, full of fight, particularly Cash Beaston, who had not lost grip of his Winchester. Cash, therefore, constituted a more immediate menace than One-eye because of his armed state. Bell did not try to reach and gun-tap him—the stone for Beaston! The cowboy hurled it forcibly. Cash didn't see the stone leave Bell's hand and his head was

swimming anyway; he couldn't have dodged in time, even prewarned. The rock, kissing his forehead, flattened him abruptly. He lay back sighing—or grunting—as if tired of life.

Once he had flung the stone, Mr. Bell did not wait to witness the result before transferring his attention to One-eye, Esquire. One-eye was all this saddle-rover had, to be sure, but he had no need of two to locate the spot where his Winchester shot sun-rays from a polished barrel. Bell got to the rifle first by a long leap, came down on it with both feet and leaning, stopped the working of what little mind One-eye possessed with a swift bat of his Colt.

The ponies of the trail tramps had gotten to their feet, though still tangled up in Bell's rope. Each packed a center-fire saddle and coiled rawhide in the tie-leathers. As his eye passed from the supine ruffians to the kicking ponies, Bell was hit by the notion how best to dispose of Messrs. Beaston and Jones; he'd send them back to the agency and let Val Horton see that odds counted for nothing in the life of Dave Bell. It should impress the Indian agent.

Not many minutes later, One-eye and Cash, still unconscious, were bound to ponybacks by the rawhide lass-ropes. Bell faced the ponies in the direction of the ridge, not doubting that they would follow the trail back to Falling Rock, and standing at their tails, whacked rumps with his hat. Cash Beaston came to his senses as the ponies were leaping away and a startled yell escaped him; his pony ran the faster. One-eye joined in the yelling before the horses had struck the upgrade of the ridge and Bell, grinning, picked up his lariat and began coiling it.

"My compliments to Val Horton," he muttered. "It's plumb plain that slick jasper ain't aimin' to mend his ways—he'll die in his boots yet!"

-5-

THE RANGE detective was treading the enemy's territory again! It was around eight or nine o'clock that night, with the moon doing her feeble best over the Pintado Basin, when he dismounted from Sleepy in the mesquite and stole toward the Lazy F corrals, his destination, the house.

Light shone forth from every front window. Bell was interested to know what was going forward at Frane headquarters and contemplated an offensive move. If there were not too many of the hands about the ranch, he would in all probability confront the Frane family and have a show-down. A visit to the Rafter J would be next on the program if he lived through the "interview" at the Lazy F.

Suddenly Dave Bell halted his advance and right hand streaked to Colt, unslinging the weapon cocked. What looked like the bent figure of a man was crouched against the corral poles twenty yards away. The click of the thumbed hammer must have been audible to the other stealthy snooper; there was an answering click from where he stood.

Each man had the other covered and neither could claim any advantage accruing to himself alone. Thus they were deadlocked a moment in utter silence; then the man by the corral spoke, low-voiced, as if he feared being heard at the house: "I'm willin' to eat lead if I can take you along, you dang booger. . ."

Bell smiled in the dark and lowered his hammer to safety. "Nick, I hadn't no idear it was you or I wouldn't 'a' drawed. Put up your

hardware like I'm puttin' up mine," he suited action to word, "an' I'll shove in closer for a wau-wau. I'm tickled thin you wasn't laid out cold in the hellin' last night."

"Come on," replied Nick Jolsen, his voice tinged with surprise; "my gun's up," and Bell discerned his hand moving holsterward. The first thing Nick said, as the stock detective crouched alongside of him, was, "You might 'a' gimme a tip last night that them Franes was bushed-up by the river." His tone was reproachful.

"Boy, I didn't know they was there myself until the trap had been sprung; wasn't no man more surprised than this hombre Bell. Tell you how it was or what I figger from what happened anyways." And Bell did so, briefly as he was able. He spoke of trailing the Lazy F herd to the reservation and of the various stirring occurrences there.

"That's the Franes all over, the damned crooks!" snarled Nick, and the hands hanging at his sides knotted into hard fists. "The crook of a agent has been favorin' them o' late ever since he—well, because he's taken a shine to my Kay, blast him to hellangone!"

He paused, choking, so great was his fury. "Say, Bell, my dad was knocked off last night—an' Uncle Lem an' Uncle Henry. Though I didn't see it happen, they must 'a' been drove intuh the quicksand by the cattle. You saw that fight, so you know how they got us on the run, bein' caught foul."

"Yeh, that's right, Nick. You hadn't much chance to rally, though I'm bound to say you did some pretty scrappin', you fellas. Well—that kinda busts up your outfit, don't if?"

"Does. Hardly a man reached home in the saddle last night. The lickin' them Franes give us—I'm hatin' like sin to admit it!—just about put the kibosh on the Rafter J. Ain't none o' the Jolsens left but me; an' the fellas we hired, most of 'em, drifted today. Shotwell Clay, the hombre whose arms you busted, was one o' the first to clear out—he'd had a-plenty. They all opined there's no use fightin' the Franes any longer. But I'm stickin', to cut notches for ol' Frane, an' Pete an' Luke—if nothin' else!"

"You don't surprise me none," Bell said calmly, "but it's a large order, son. Mebbeso part o' the reason you're Injunin' 'round here is to get word with Kay; am I right?"

"You bet!" Nick's tone was vehement, but not in the same way as when he spoke of Kay's father and brothers. The boy's affection for the girl had not been displaced by the losses he had sustained and Bell was pleased by the discovery.

Dave Bell started to say something when Nick grasped his arm and enjoined him to listen. The staccato drumming of a horse's hoofs came from afar, pulling steadily closer. The two men in the corral's shadow aired much conjecture as to who was coming before that party hove into their field of vision; but with all their guessing they had not hit anywhere near the truth. The gleam of a white sombrero crowning this horseman gave away his identity as surely as if he had been riding in broad daylight. Val Horton, the Indian agent, of course!

"Tie yourself to the ground, boy!" warned Bell in a whisper as Nick, snarling under his breath like a meat-scenting tiger, hunched forward. "Wait an' see what happens. Mebbe he's here on business."

"Yeh!—business o' making up to my Kay!" gritted young Jolsen, but he heeded Bell's advice.

VAL HORTON passed them by at not more than a dozen yards and kept on toward the ranch-house. After he had ridden around the corner of the main building they could not see

him; but shortly following his vanishment they heard the slam of a screen door and the voice of Walt Frane welcoming his nocturnal visitor. Under Bell's hand, which rested on Nick's shoulder, they boy fairly trembled from the violence of his pent-up emotions, plain and fancy hatred.

And when, twenty minutes later, Val Horton came forth again, accompanied by Kay Frane, the fat fell in the fire! Val was leading his horse, one arm thrust through the rein, the other essaying to slide around the waist of the girl who walked unwillingly at his side. She side-stepped nimbly, pushing his arm down. Bell had almost to sit on Nick, to keep him from rushing out and doing battle for his woman.

"Wait—hear what they got to say!" hissed Bell in the ear of the writhing Nick, while holding a calloused hand over the latter's mouth.

The pair came a little way from the house and stood bathed in moon-ray. Val Horton was speaking, his white-hatted head close to the girl's. This was agony indeed for the madly jealous Nicholas.

"Whether you want to marry me or not, Kay, your father has promised me you shall—and tomorrow is the date set. Noon tomorrow, at the little church in Rockmound. You don't seem a bit happy."

"Happy, eh?" retorted the girl, in tone witheringly scornful. "Why, you sod-huggin' snake, you've got nerve to use the word to me! An' say, Mr. Horton, do you reckon I'm some helpless kid to let them march me off to marry you?"

"No, I don't reckon that; but your father guarantees delivery on time at the church. Maybe he's going to hog-tie you— I don't know."

"We'll see about that!" declared Kay. "Such a man—willin' to get hitched up to a girl who has to be hog-tied, like a sacrifice—an that's what! Never heard the like. It don't make any difference that I hate you like a nest o' rattlers?"

"None at all. I've busted the spirit of more than one squaw, and..." But his anger was leading him into hazardous channels and he chopped speech suddenly.

"Squaw! You mean you've been a squaw-man? Well, you don't have to answer— I'll bet it's true. Slipped out before you knew it, eh? Let me tell you one thing: if it should happen I'm dragged to that church an' the sky pilot makes his little speech over us, you can bank on it I won't be your wife any longer than it takes me to get hold of a gun."

"You'll kill yourself, eh?" With a snarling laugh. "You must like me a heap."

"Not myself, no!— I'll drop you!" That was the stuff!

Dave Bell's hand was held rather loosely over Nick's mouth and at this utterance of the girl's, young Jolsen started to cheer. Quickly the range detective tightened the grip of his hand and the cheer was turned into a most peculiar sound. The harm was done, however, the noise reaching the ears of Val Horton and Kay distinctly. Swiftly the Indian agent unslung his gun, demanding to know, "Who the hell's that?"

Neither he nor Kay could make out the crouching figures, so deep was the shadow by the corral. There was no immediate reply to Horton's challenge and Kay stood for a moment undecided whether to try and prevent the agent from shooting or not. She was thinking of Nick. If that was Nick...

Dave Bell was whispering in the boy's ear: "Hell's gonna cut loose now! You lay low here an' likely they'll pass you by if I show myself an' draw Horton after me. All the Franes will come in on the play but Kay. You try to see her, boy, an' per-

suade her to go away with you tonight. Come past the Halfway Shack on your way outta the basin, 'cause I figger to be there an' wantuh know how you make out. Quick, say 'yes!' "

For answer Nick shoved his right hand into Bell's horny clasp. They shook and Bell flung away from the shadows, conjuring pistol from belt. Val Horton was repeating "who the hell," but not moving a step to find out, when the six-gun of Bell roared. The while sombrero slewed to the back of Mr. Horton's head and fell off into the dust. His pride had fallen!

"Tag! You're it, squaw-buster! Chase me!" shouted Bell; and turned to run for his horse, a hundred yards away in the mesquite, as he heard the slamming of the ranch-house door and the thump along the porch of many booted feet.

Bell topped Sleepy, who had been dozing three-legged, and made sure that the Indian agent and the men who had reinforced him—the whole Frane family, no doubt—got away from the vicinity of that corral and on his trail without discovering Nick Jolsen. Had they stumbled upon Nick, Bell would have ridden the back trail, gun crashing! He streaked off into the main basin trail, leading them with a fine start toward the Halfway Shack. The Lazy F bunkhouse had yielded its quota to the party of pursuit, so that, strung out, they covered a considerable strip of trail. Walt Frane, his sons, Pete and Luke, and the rest of them—with the exception of Val Horton—realized that Bell was hitting out for the old "fort" by the quicksand, and knew also that if he gained it ahead of them they stood very little chance of doing away with him this night. Therefore, they spurred and quirted and all but cut their horses' flanks to ribbons with steel teeth and seasoned rawhide in a mad effort to overtake him this side of the old Halfway—all in vain!

Bell was dismounting at the shack door while his pursuers were all of half a mile down the trail. He laughed aloud as he drove Sleepy into the cabin and followed, lounging in the open doorway, where the moonlight fell aslant of his defiant figure, until the galloping horsemen drew near enough for him to salute them with the first pistol shot he had fired since knocking off Val Horton's hat.

THAT BULLET, zipping close to Walt Frane's head, caused the old rustler to yank his horse around with a savage hand, and the incensed brute was still dancing in circles when the other riders piled past at top speed, shooting futilely. The shack door slammed, the bolt rattled into the brackets and Bell was well "forted."

He swapped lead with them for upward of an hour, poking his gun through the loopholes which the Franes themselves had gouged in the log walls; he tallied often, as they foolishly rode "Indian circle," trying to thrust rifle or six-shooter into one of the loops. A Lazy F puncher, hammering close, and dropping off his horse cat-like, did succeed in thus inserting the barrel of his Colt, turning it so that the bullet would rake the shack's interior at an angle. Dave Bell came within a hair of impeding that slug, for his back was toward the side of the cabin on which the cowboy-rustler stood. Springing across the room and waiting silently below the loophole, Bell shoved his own gun through the instant the cowboy's Colt was withdrawn: and roar of gun and yell of stricken human blended.

Walt Frane had known from the first that he couldn't win; and after losses had dampened his ardor—though hardly tempered his wrath—he called his fighters off. They were ready to quit, too. Bell would have been a big handful for an army, sheltered by those four scarred but

stout walls. They didn't sit down to starve him out; nor did they try smoking him into the open, refraining from the latter expedient because they expected to use the shack again as a line-cabin since the virtual blotting out of the Jolsen spread. Walt firmly believed by now that Dave Bell was either an Association rider or a Federal marshal and the breed of hombre who would "infest" those parts, duty-bent, until something "happened" to him. Yes, old Frane was gambling they'd meet again! running away now assured fitness to fight on another day.

Bell stepped to the door, lifted the bolt and flung it wide to shout derisively after the retreating horsemen while they were yet in pistol-shooting range. Some about-faced in the saddle to look back; but not a horse was turned from the straight-away, nor was more powder burned. This was due to muttered order of old Walt Frane, baffled but not beaten. As he jogged homeward beside Val Horton, the Indian Agent recounted the visit paid him that day by this same fighting fool of a Bell and told how One-eye and Cash had come back to the Agency roped to their ponies and weaponless.

Half the night, Bell waited up for Nick Jolsen to put in an appearance, hoping that when the boy did come, if at all, Kay Frane would be riding at his side. When it was approaching three o'clock in the morning, the range detective concluded that Nick would not show up. Something had happened; Bell hoped it was nothing very serious. He got up from his seat in the shack doorway, ground his tenth cigaret into the dirt beneath a heel and turned to go in. Hoofbeats on the trail below arrested his steps on the doorsill. One horseman! Nick, no doubt. Bell was slightly disappointed; to render him completely happy there should have been two horses coming. But perhaps, the thought struck him, that one horse was carrying double. He lifted a hand to fend off the moonlight and peered along the dark aisle. In a few moments a horse and rider were cast in silver as they pushed beyond the shadowed area—and only one rider.

"Hell!" exclaimed Dave Bell, the first assistant to Romance.

It was Nick Jolsen, sure enough, and he was wounded. But not seriously. He had managed to get to Kay's side and have about two words with her when some Lazy F riders, returning from the range, butted in and started chasing him. His wound had been received at the beginning of the fracas. He'd got even for it during the running fight which ensued by gunning two men out of the saddle; was glad to say he thought they would not recover. Cutting off from joining Bell when he was set upon, Nick had led his pursuers in a circle, losing them at last and pointing for the Halfway Shack. The hard riding had not improved the young fellow's wound as Bell discovered when he examined it in the cabin by candlelight. A nasty hole in the shoulder, which would prevent the use of his left arm and hand for a time. The cowboy detective washed and bound it up, pondering the while.

"You didn't get a chance to ask her to run away, then?" inquired Bell, breaking a long silence and patting the neatly bandaged shoulder, not a little pleased with his work.

"Nary chance. What am I goin' to do, Dave? I can't let her marry that coyote of a Horton!" His eyes flashed. "My right an' shootin' hand ain't crip..."

"HOLD YOUR hosses, now," interrupted Bell. "I think I see the way to pilot you youngsters outta this bog an' on the happiness trail, an' about all you'll have to do is be on hand to say 'yes' when the preacher asks, 'Do you take this woman for your wedded wife?' Good thing we overheard what we did, Nick, so's we

can dope out how to checkmate 'em. Weddin' to take place at noon tomorra in the church at Rockmound! We'll be in town long before that an' waitin'. I reckon Walt Frane is the kind of hombre to keep his word about producin' the girl at the right time, even if he has to hog-tie her, like the agent said."

"He'll do it, awright, damn him!" snorted Nick.

"I'm glad—for this once. We won't have to worry none that Kay won't be on hand. Now, you get some sleep if you can an' I'll get some; we ain't got much time left for it an' we'll need all the strength we're able to corral. Wait a mo', I'll fetch the blanket off your saddle for a pillow."

Nick didn't get a wink of sleep, however, his wound throbbed so, and he looked more than a little haggard when Bell turned sleep-heavy eyes on him again at dawn.

"You ain't presentin' the picture o' my idear of a bridegroom, son," said the cowboy detective, arising from his blanket on the cabin floor and shaking it out. "But after you've et mebbe you'll feel better. Hold yourself together, for this is one o' the red-letter days in your life."

Shortly after nine o'clock they were riding, knee and knee, up the wide main street of Rockmound, situated several miles north of Pintado Basin. They had come in by a trail which, said Nick Jolsen, led ultimately to the Falling Rock Reservation, and Dave Bell tucked the information in the back of his mind for later use. That other bridegroom would be coming along this road soon, if he had not already done so.

Bell was keenly alert; really he was obliged to supply the eyes for both of them as Nick had a trifle of fever from his wound. But nothing was to be seen of Val Horton abroad, nor of the Franes. Nick pointed out the church, a small frame affair; and afterward the courthouse, when Bell asked him where he intended securing a license. En route to the courthouse they stopped at a general store and Nick purchased a green-gold wedding ring. Out and into the saddles again; the clerk at the courthouse was going to refuse issuing a license with only one of the parties to it present, until Bell explained the circumstances.

"This marriage might have to be pulled off with a rush, an' the crackin' o' guns will likely take the place o' ringin' bells," he concluded. "Nick, you stay here whiles I do a mite o' scoutin'."

Nick required no more persuasion than that, for the ride from the basin had played hob with his strength. Dave Bell quit the courthouse and visited the two saloons which kept the town from drying up, but Val Horton was in neither of them. The cowboy detective was striding forth to get his horse and intercept the Indian Agent on the out-trail when the patter of many hoofs down-street drew his gaze to a bunch of horsemen entering town, preceded by a buckboard. Walt Frane was driving the buck-wagon and in the rear seat was Kay; she appeared to be tied, though Bell could not be certain at the distance which then separated them. He swiftly backed into the saloon and, to lend an air of casualness to his movements, lest there be friends of the Franes at the bar behind him, he rolled a cigaret while watching at the grimy front window for the buckboard and horsemen to pass by.

VERY SOON they moved into his field of vision and it was fortunate for him that they customarily patronized the saloon almost opposite rather than the one in which he had taken his stand, for only the buckboard went as far as the church—the mounted escort, consisting of Pete and Luke Frane, and seven hard-baked cowpunchers and gunmen, swung up to the hitch-rack as they came abreast

of it, slid down, tied and crowded inside for their "pain-killer." The buckwagon, containing the grim, burly Walt and the defiant Kay—she was tied—rattled churchward; pressing his face to the window-pane, Bell saw the vehicle stop in front of it.

The attention of the barroom loungers had been attracted ere this and the comments they made upon viewing Kay's helpless state led the cowboy detective to believe they would dare to do battle with the Franes if a competent man to lead them were at hand. But Bell was determined to face the issue alone at the start; if the cards ran against him, then he might try to ring in a little assistance. The coming of so many Lazy F hands as escort—or whatever the reason—was unexpected, but, after all, would save Bell a ride to the basin.

Walt Frane came out of the church and trudged back up the street, along the creaking sidewalk boards, before Bell had vacated his original post in the saloon window. He was careful not to let the old pirate see him as Walt flung a threatening glance at the staring group in the saloon doorway, some of its members spilled out upon the stoop. No words were spoken but the looks exchanged were dirty enough to start something. "I'd admire to see some'un grab that ol' mosshead by the horns an' break him!" one of the group growled as Walt presented his broad back to them and entered that other whisky-mill.

Bell shouldered himself a lane through the loungers to the boardwalk and bent his steps toward the courthouse. He changed his course, however, when he perceived, from the tail of his eye, that one of the Lazy F punchers had emerged from the saloon across the way and was bow-legging it rapidly in the direction of the church. Bell crossed the street below the fellow, walked up an alley, then hastened across the back lots to a rear window of the church. He got there in time to see the cowboy swaggering down the aisle between the numerous rows of long benches which served as pews.

Nearer to Dave Bell, at the back of the church, below a platform on which was erected a rude sort of pulpit, were two figures that claimed his attention next. One was Kay Frane, her wrists and ankles secured to chair-back and chair-legs respectively; the other was the minister, and despite his timid appearance he was fumbling at Kay's knots, as if to release her, when the Lazy F puncher swung into the aisle.

"Hey, you let that rope be, damn you!" barked the newcomer, when he saw what the minister was about. He yanked forth his gun and increased the length of his stride. "The boss reckoned, all of a sudden, you might try somethin' like that there an' sent me packin' to ride herd on the lady an' you!"

"If you kill me there certainly won't be any marriage ceremony today," retorted the preacher, with surprising calmness; yet he desisted from further knot loosening.

"I don't aim to lay you out cold, only give you a wallop in the brainbox to make you behave!" snorted the hard-visaged cowpunch. He had reached the pair by the pulpit and roughly pushed the preacher to one side, looking down at Kay with the smile of a devil.

Dave Bell softly tried the window with his left hand, found that it was unlocked and raised it—or started to. All three people in the church caught the scraping sound of the sash in its grooves and three pairs of eyes were turned upon the intruder, the Lazy F fellow facing to the rightabout with gun lifted. But he was lined already, that hard-boiled guy— Bell's right hand slid across the sill containing iron, while his left still gripped the bottom of the sash.

"I'm comin' in," spoke Bell, with a nasty smile for the dumbfounded cowboy, "whether you like it or not! Hold

steady—or better, leggo that smoke-pole! I'm in a mean mood today, so don't over-wait your split second limit!"

Very reluctantly he was accorded obedience and then, in no time at all it seemed, he was through the window and in the church, standing by the little group. He directed the minister to attack those knots once more while he held the Lazy F man passive under his gun. Naturally, Kay Fran e was delighted, as well as amazed, to see him, and her joy mounted when he told her certain things. Presently the girl was free of her bonds and the preacher handed Bell the pieces of rope.

"With your permission, parson, I'd like to tie this roughneck to one o' your benches," said Bell; and when the preacher nodded quickly, the cowboy detective prodded the "hard one" toward the first row of benches and commanded him to stretch out on his back.

FIFTEEN minutes later Nick Jolsen had been smuggled into church, and he and Kay were sitting on a bench, deep in very important confab. The boy had a high fever, the increase no doubt due to the excitement under which he labored. Kay was greatly concerned over his wound, although he assured her it was but a scratch. As for Dave Bell, he had quit the scene temporarily and gone on an errand of which he would say nothing; but he didn't fool Nick or Kay as to what it was.

Racking past the saloon to which the Lazy F "wedding party" had repaired to tank up on rotgut, awaiting the arrival of Walt's selection of a bridegroom, Bell pulled his hat low and sunk the irons in Sleepy, not wishing to be recognized prematurely. He intended throwing a gunning party for the Lazy F, but not for a little while yet; he knew that Val Horton hadn't arrived or there would have been a concerted movement of the outfit from saloon to church.

Nursing the knowledge of Val's tardiness—somewhat thankfully, it is true—the stock detective raised the dust along that trail which Nick had said terminated or at least went by the Agency, in a quest of the belated bridegroom. He had covered not more than a mile, when, rounding a bend in the road, he perceived the trail beyond whipped into a flurry of alkali by three riders—two pursuing one! The foremost and lone rider was Val Horton, his pursuers were Bell's singing trailers of yesterday. The range detective comprehended nothing of the situation except that the saddle troubadours—he knew them not by name—seemed to have turned to bite the hand that hired them.

As a matter of fact, Val Horton had fired One-eye Jones and Cash Beaston; booted them, while drunk, down the Agency steps and ordered their vanishment, never to show face again around Falling Rock, because of their failure to bring him a report of Dave Bell's taking-off. But One-eye and Cash were not to be so easily disposed of; this morning, back-along, they had attempted to bushwhack Horton, and failing, rolled tail after him hotly. Yet, forking a superior breed of horse, he was steadily drawing away from the vengeful trail tramps, on the point of bidding them "adios!"

Bell drew rein, passing a hand thoughtfully across a whiskery chin and observing: "Them saddle bums could take a killin' off my hands if only their ponies was faster or their shootin' surer."

NOW AND again there sounded the crackling explosion of a rifle in that fog of alkali rearward of the agent; but there was no evidence of bullet finding billet— Horton's horse never faltered in its racing stride. Ordinarily One-eye and Cash were expert at hitting stationary targets or

moving ones; but there was some white mule still in their systems to interfere with accuracy. Bell got down from the saddle, slowly drew his Colt and threw the long barrel across the crooked elbow of his left arm.

"I dunno what-for they're chasin' him, but likely it's somethin'," he muttered. "Nothin' white 'bout none o' the three an' I'm hopin' they slide to hell together—here's a shot for law an' order, sure!"

His lips were a thin, grim line as he "beaded" on the Indian agent's mount. Horton had been sixty or seventy yards away when Bell dismounted; when the cowpuncher's .45 bellowed, but forty yards separated them and Val Horton was gazing pop-eyed at the fellow who patently barred his way —recognition of that threatening figure roused Horton's apprehension as much as the fact that Bell was fingering a gun. A flash, a roar, blended light and sound—Bell had drilled the agent's leaping horse! As it plunged down, the rider untangled feet from stirrup-irons and sprang clear. He fired at Bell—missed. The range detective did not move, did not return the shot. One-eye and Cash were spurring madly, shouting joyously. Val Horton was running, cursing everybody, when the dust clouds pushed by the trail tramps rolled alongside him. He was enveloped by that dust, hand-guns boomed, but Bell did not stand to see what should be revealed when the stirred alkali settled. He wheeled and mounted and rode off townward, not once looking back.

Again he risked trailing through main street ahorse, heading for the church, and was pleased to note that the yelling and gunplay on the out-trail had not caused any stir in Rockmound. Possibly concentration on the friendly glass accounted for the lack of interest. He flung groundward at the hitching-bar by the church, tying Sleepy next to the buckboard team.

A few minutes later Nick and Kay were made man and wife in the presence of Dave Bell and the squirming Lazy F prisoner on the bench, who besides being roped hand and foot, was neckerchief-gagged, which did not prevent his seeing and hearing everything, and that was all that was required of him as a witness. The newlyweds were more than a trifle nervous, though also deliriously happy, as they faced Bell and received his congratulations.

"Don't look so medium-sick, folks," said he; "I'm takin' a li'l pasear down-street an' I expect to fetch you back good news. Stay right here till you see me again."

"Let me..." began Nick, knowing quite well what Bell's destination and errand were.

"Which I should say not!" cut in the range detective, and whirled on jingling heels and quitted their presence swiftly.

Kay was deathly pale as she laid her head on her husband's breast, but not a word did she utter.

DAVE BELL examined his six-shooter as he rattled the sidewalk boards in the direction of that saloon where the Lazy F forces were drinkin' to Kay's health—and their own. He made absolutely certain that the fit of his gun in the holster would not slow up his draw. Here was the saloon entrance; he turned inside, without pause, and the men bucking the bar looked around lazily—or hazily—at his musical entry.

An oath boomed through the room and Walt Frane, who had given vent to it, swung away from the mahogany and faced Bell with fingers clawing gunstock. Pete and Luke Frane slipped up on either flank of their saddle-legged sire, in copied attitudes of menace, almost before Bell could open his mouth to say, ringingly:

"Frane, I just been witnessin' the

marriage o' your Kay to Nick Jolsen, as good a man as ever rode the Pintado Basin if you give him half a chance to be honest! What I aim to learn is this: you gonna call off this feud business, traipse up to the church an' give Kay an' Nick your blessin'—or walk intuh my smoke?"

Walt Frane wasn't half a minute making up his mind; he hardly credited this stuff Dave Bell was telling him, but he had honed to kill Bell ever since the first day they met and the opportunity to do so seemed rosy. He started to pull—never finished. Bell's right hand was sight-baffling; the iron he had seemingly conjured out of the air vomited a long flame, smoke-wreathed. Walt Frane jarred the floor as he stretched upon it, a hole between his eyes; and again did the floorboards tremble as Pete and Luke, the latter getting in the only shot to the credit of the Franes, crumpled up beside their lawless daddy. Three leaden slugs had sped to the mark fatally from Bell's gun in almost the batting of an eye!

THE COWBOY detective's left arm hung broken by the bullet out of Luke Frane's six-shooter, but his voice was steady and held no hint of suffering as he focused steely gaze on the rest of the Lazy F outfit. They were trapped in an unenviable position when the gunplay began.

Now it was over and they had not been hurt and surely they breathed easier on that account; but their surprise at Bell's temerity in out-facing single-handed the dread Frane trio had mounted to amazement as they beheld the ace of killers and his two sons down—down, never to get up and make Pintado Basin trails run red. To Bell's even-toned speech they harkened most attentively.

"If there's any hombre would like to grab the end o' the handkerchief the Franes has dropped, let him or them reach lively, 'cause I'm in the humor to oblige now. Should it be that nobody's gainsayin' I salivated them terrible Turks for the good o' Pintado Basin, I'm invitin' every man in here who rides a Lazy F hoss to walk out an' fork it an' ride so damn far away he'll forget he ever heard the name Pintado. Am I makin' myself plumb clear?"

And the biggest surprise of all was that they went. A crew of as tough citizens as ever hired out their guns, trooped wordlessly to their horses, mounted and laid on the quirt. They left at the hitch-rack four horses bearing the Lazy F brand. Bell was leading one of these ponies as he stalked back to the church, for the prisoner on the bench should have the same chance as his mates.

Already Bell was thinking of moving on Arizonaward; the purpose for which he had dallied in the basin had been accomplished, the Franes unwittingly aiding him when they all but wiped out to a man the tribe of Jolsen. And Bell had attended to the case of the Franes, staining his hands with the blood of Kay's unnatural father and brothers to save her husband from cutting those same notches (or what was more likely, prevented Nick's untimely demise). Bell felt entirely justified in what he had done, from first to last; he knew that the only way to make peace, sometimes, is first to make war.

NICK AND Kay Jolsen stood beside Dave Bell in the office of Rockmound's physician— Bell was the first patient Doctor Tupper had had in two months. A hardy breed, the Westerners; their few and far between sicknesses were usually fatal; in other words, lead-poisoning cases developed beyond a physician's ability to cure. The cowboy detective's outing shirt was off and a bandage on his left arm, over splints, was assum-

ing goodly proportions as the doctor unwound and rewound length after length of gauze. Nick, urged by Kay and Bell, was going to have Tupper look at his shoulder.

"You oughta be able to round up a fair-sized herd from the leavin's o' Lazy F an' Rafter J," remarked Bell, glancing up suddenly at Nick and his wife.

They agreed he was right. They'd have to hire an entire new crew of hands... Now, what brand...

"Let's use the Rafter F," said Kay.

"Lazy J," said Nick.

"Don't start that feud all over again, kids," broke in Bell. "Both them brands got a bad name in these parts—why not start fresh with, say, a Heart-in-a-Box iron? Kinda 'propriate, huh?" he grinned as they turned smiling faces his way.

"Heart-in-a-Box is good," said Kay.

"That's what," Nick agreed.

"I'm some peacemaker." Dave Bell commented, as if to himself. "All right, doc, that feels fine. Skin outa your coat, Nick!"

You've Convinced Us, Pardners!

We've been sittin' here, thinking about all those fine, friendly letters you've been writing, asking us why we don't make WESTERN ACTION a digest-size magazine. "Look at how slick FAMOUS WESTERN is, since you made it that handy pocket size", you've said.

Well, now we just can't help agreeing with y'all — and for a matter o' fact, we've been wanting to do just this thing. All we needed to spur us into action was some words of encouragement from you. So...

Starting with the next issue, July 1958, WESTERN ACTION *will be digest size, the same as* FAMOUS WESTERN.

You'll find MORE PAGES, more words, more top-notch stories and fact features in each issue, when we doll up in our fancy new outfit. And we'd sure admire to hear from y'all, *so won't you please drop us a postal card and let us know how you feel about this change? Thanks, pards.*

don't forget the new, digest-size

WESTERN ACTION

132 Pages — July issue on sale May 1st

LAWMAN'S SALVATION

by T. R. Young

The man-hunting jobs that Deputy Marshal Will Evans jumped to grab wouldn't help the bitterness in him — they were just a brief escape . . .

DEPUTY U. S. MARSHAL Will Evans gently flicked the short riding whip across his mare's flank. She reared her head erect and picked up a brisk pace. The sharp ringing of the anvil ceased as the blacksmith looked up and curiously watched him pass. Will hung the looped end of the quirt's handle around the horn. Two old-timers sitting on a wooden bench in front of Bart's General Store stopped their daily gab to stare at him.

Will patted the mare's neck, and rode on up the single street. He was a man who didn't believe in wearing spurs that could dig out an animal's belly. Will wore no visible side arms, but carried a small, loaded revolver in a shoulder holster under his buckskin jacket. The red glow from the setting sun reflected brightly against the badge pinned on the jacket's front. He felt a sudden longing in his heart as he watched a young woman hanging out a wash up the slope to his right.

For almost five years, he saw something of Ellie in every woman that he looked at. He knew this job he had jumped to grab wouldn't help the bitterness within him; it was just another means of a brief escape. Tomorrow always faced him.

He saw the weather-beaten building that was the doctor's office and reined up behind the harnessed buggy. Will went inside and made a brief acquaintance with Doc Miller. He soon came back out, mounted his mare, and slowly rode on up the street. It was a sort of future insurance he made before each new job. There was always the likely chance of gunplay and Will felt better knowing there would be a doctor in the vicinity.

The short, fat proprietor of the *Gold Nugget Saloon* looked up at him as he casually leaned against the brass rail. The saloon keeper's blue, active eyes focused on the shiny badge for a moment, then he said, "Marshal Evans?"

Will nodded. The man pushed a bottle and a clean glass in front of Will. "Drink?" the man said.

"Yeah," said Will. "Yeah, I suppose so." He glanced around at the four or five patrons in the house. Will turned his attention back to the proprietor. "You're Cole Lowry?"

The man acknowledged with a motion of his hand. He turned and reached for something in a low cabinet behind him. Cole Lowry handed it to Will. "I don't know too much about this Jessie Spears character. Jessie comes in here two or three nights a week. This started, oh, some six or eight weeks ago." Will fingered the black neckerchief more carefully.

Will said, "Don't seem logical the Phantom Kid would wear this over his face. It's silk. This is part of a woman's apparel."

Cole Lowry gestured affirmatively with a sweep of his hand. "That's what Ching Lo kept telling me," he said. "Naturally, that scarf don't prove Jessie is the Phantom Kid."

"Naturally," said Will, slowly removing his badge and shoving it down in his jacket pocket. "Who's Ching Lo, Lowry?"

The proprietor pointed his finger down the bar. "Over yonder," he said. "The Chinaman cleaning those tables. He's a sort of right hand around here."

WILL WATCHED the small Chinese at work. Ching Lo looked up. His round face was jovial. Cole Lowry waved him over. The Chinese carefully placed his things on the table, then came at a stiff, brisk walk. He made a quick, formal bow, and smiled broadly. "Yes, Mista' Lowry?"

Cole Lowry leaned closer over the bar. "This is Marshal Evans, Ching Lo. Few people knows he's here. Let's us keep it that way. He's come all the way from Cedar Rapids to put a hook on the Phantom Kid."

The Chinese nodded. "My honorable ancestors have taught this humble servant that his empty head contains nothing." He looked up and grinned at Will.

Will couldn't help but laugh. Ching Lo acted pleased that his humor was being appreciated. "I am at your disposal, Marshal Evans. It is indeed a rare occasion that Bear Creek is frequented by a man of your position." He made another formal bow. "It is hoped that my unskilled humor may continue to erase the years of worry from your face. And now if you will kindly excuse this one, he will return to his work." Ching Lo faded backward and departed. A puzzled frown creased Will's face as he curiously watched the Chinese resume his work.

Cole Lowry shrugged his massive shoulders and jokingly laughed. "That Chinaman thinks he's a philosopher of all man's troubles. If you listen to him, Evans, he'll be predicting your future life. Just another dumb Chinaman."

Will looked over the rim of his glass for several moments. Serious thoughts were flashing through his mind. "Yeah?" he finally said. "Maybe Ching Lo is not so dumb after all. He seemed to be doing a pretty good job of mind reading. My mind." Will folded the silk scarf and stuffed it down in his pocket.

Cole Lowry rubbed his thick chin and nodded. "It's possible, Evans. Ching Lo was the one that saw Jessie Spears drop that scarf. It must have happened when Jessie pulled out some money to pay for the drinks he and his friends were having. Jessie left pretty quick after that. He hasn't been back too often since then. I guess he missed that black neckerchief and figured he might have dropped it in here."

Will took a quick sip of his drink. "Ching Lo gave it to you after Jessie left?"

Cole Lowry frowned. "No, Evans. Not right away. I saw him pick it up and he seemed awfully worried about what had just happened."

"Oh?" said Will. He slowly began rolling a cigaret. Will hesitated before

licking the paper. "From the reports we've received in Cedar Rapids, the Phantom Kid has been riding the hills and plains at night now for some three or four years. He's a lone wolf, but not a killer. Of all the reports we've received since I took this job, there's never been the mention of the Kid's shooting at any one. He grabs off a few head of cows, maybe a few horses, and that's all until the next report comes in. Then the cattle market drops out of sight and every rancher for five hundred miles around wants the Phantom Kid's hide."

He quickly finished the cigaret and stuck it in his mouth. "The Kid's become a thorn in the rancher's side and they want him stopped, not that I can't blame them. The Kid, whoever it is, has broken the law. I read your long letter several times, Lowry. What you said concerning this Jessie Spears character has me deeply puzzled. Is there any other habits you've noticed queer about Spears?"

Cole Lowry rubbed hard on his thick jaw. He glanced up at the kerosene lamps attached in a circular row atop the low slung wagonwheel. Then he lowered his head and tapped thoughtfully on the bar. "Jessie has several minor quirks. He can't, for one thing, roll a cigarette like most men. Acts more like a kid. Jessie don't look to be no older than a kid. Always wears a long doeskin jacket and a big, white hat. I've never seen him take the jacket or hat off. Seems to be always trying to hide behind them. He keeps his distance from the others. Grabs a table in the far corner and sits there alone for an hour or so. There was once a young punk in here that tried to make a name for himself at Jessie's expense."

WILL EXHALED a puff of smoke. "What happened in that incident, Lowry?"

"Jessie busted the punk's hand with a .44 slug," said Cole. "I never saw a faster draw come from nowhere before. I think Jessie carries a Colt on his left hip. It was one hell of a cross draw, Evans."

Will ground out the cigaret butt. "Anyone know what this character does for a living?"

Cole shrugged. "Not for certain. Some say he comes from the Settlement of Shepherd Hills."

"What's that?"

"A range of mountains north of here. A group of sheepherders have been raising sheep up there for several years now. Some say that Jessie may be one of them."

"But no one knows for certain?"

"There's only two men in this town that might possibly know everything about Jessie Spears, Evans."

"Yeah?"

"Grubstake for one. He's an old prospector that hangs out around Bear Creek. He thinks the ground is sacred that Jessie walks over. The youngster keeps the old man pretty well supplied on liquor and Lord knows what else. I honestly believe that Grubstake would die for Jessie. He must be like a father to the kid."

Will turned the glass slowly between his hands. "Or maybe like a mother. Who's the other man Jessie is friendly with?"

"Huh?" said Cole. "What do you mean like a mother?"

Will downed the swallow in the bottom of the glass. He spun the glass around in front of Lowry's puzzled face. Will turned the glass over. "Let's look at the other side for a while. Jessie Spears just might not be a man after all."

Cole Lowry's mouth went slack. He gripped his side of the bar as if he needed the support. "Evans, are you serious about that?"

Will stared Lowry in the eye. "In my business, mister, you have to be serious. Who's the other man Jessie runs with?"

Lowry turned pale. "Ching Lo!"

Will suddenly turned. He stared across at the tables Ching Lo had been

cleaning. Ching Lo was gone. Cole Lowry came from behind the bar. "That Chinaman has never left here without telling me where he was going."

WILL QUICKLY paced toward the batwings. "He's gone this time," said Will. Cole Lowry came out on the boardwalk with Will. They looked up and down the single street. They saw nothing of the little Chinese. It was almost dark.

Will swung up in his saddle. "You got any idea at all where that Chinaman might have gone?"

Cole Lowry rubbed his apron between his nervous hands. "Grubstake sleeps in a small room behind the stable. You'd better get up there, Evans."

Will reined his mare around. He galloped up the street and pulled up in front of the livery. A middle-aged woman was dismounting from a buggy. Will fished out his badge. "I'm looking for Grubstake, ma'am."

She shook her head. "Him and that Chinaman rode off in direction of Shepherd Hills, Marshal. Sake's alive, mister, you'll get lost up there for sure."

Will grinned. "Not me, ma'am. I spent all of last week in those hills." She looked surprised. Will tipped his hat and rode away.

He tried to think of more pleasant things as he led his mare deeper into Shepherd Hills. Hardly a day or night passed that Will didn't think about the wonderful early months of his marriage to Ellie Saunders.

Then without any apparent cause that he could think of, Ellie suddenly disappeared while he was gone on an assignment. Tongues wagged in Cedar Rapids, because she had packed and left with a saddle bum. Will was shocked to the core. He couldn't believe that she had done such a thing. He thought all time that Ellie loved him as much as he loved her.

What had gone wrong? For almost five years, Will had been unable to figure it. He had never left her alone long at a time. Will had always tried to give her everything to make her happy. Ellie even took what little savings he had made. It all had left him in a bitter state of confusion. He had started to resign his position and try and find her. Marshal Jack Sears cautioned him that his career would be finished if he did. It would be better to try and face up to the black blow that had been dealt him. Will's stubborn pride proved out, but he couldn't relate the thousands of times he had almost lost faith.

Perhaps he had tried to please Ellie too much. She always had her way in everything. Will had gone over this possibility time after time. But the fact still remained, he knew deep down that he still loved her. But he often wondered what action he would take if ever he found her again. Would he give her another chance even if she wanted it? She might had rather remain in another man's embrace. If she crawled to him, would his bitterness suddenly turn to blood hate and cause him to severely chastise her? The confusion was always there to torment him. Will didn't know what he would do.

His mare suddenly stopped and perked her ears at the top of a steep ridge. He saw the clump of shadowy woods at the far bottom. Campfire light flickered dimly through the thick grove of poplars. Will dismounted, then tethered his mare to graze at a short distance off from the rough path he had been following. He slowly and cautiously worked his way down the rocky slope.

CHING LO stood near the fire facing the hillside. An older man was sitting on the ground, his back propped against a cut fire log. Will peered up over the boulder he was lying behind. The older man had long, white hair. He looked slim and bony. Will figured he was Grubstake.

Then his attention focused on the third individual. Will thought this

must be Jessie Spears. But what were they all doing lounging around a campfire out in the open? Will inched forward on his belly to get behind a closer boulder to the group. He saw Ching Lo methodically fingering his long queue. The third individual was sitting on the ground with legs crossed. All Will could see was the back of a doeskin jacket and a wide, white hat.

It had to be Jessie Spears, Will thought. They evidently hadn't told Jessie that a lawman was in Bear Creek. Will was almost holding his breath. He watched the stranger hand up a coffee cup to Ching Lo. The Chinese grinned. "At least this old one still makes good coffee that pleases one Jessie Spears."

"That was real good, Ching Lo," said Jessie. "What about another cup of the same?" The Chinese bowed briefly. Will frowned, listening carefully. That voice, he thought; there was something strangely familiar about it. It sounded like a masculine voice, but yet he was certain he detected a noticeable flaw that puzzled him.

Ching Lo expertly handed the steaming refilled cup to Jessie Spears. "Thank you, Ching Lo," said Jessie. Will noticed it was courtesy out of ordinary. The coarseness in Jessie's voice was not natural; Will was certain the tone of that voice was being faked.

"I'm glad you two old codgers decided to come and see me for a change," said Jessie. "The Phantom Kid can take a night off and be with his friends. But what's this nonsense about you two wanting me to quit this masquerading as you call it?"

Ching Lo stared over the campfire blaze. "This old one has lived many years. To be one thing and live as another is only to deceive one's self. You are still young and could with great struggle and faith start life anew. Your two friends are much wiser in many ways of life. It is this one's humble belief that you could greatly ease your suffering and the suffering of others by just being yourself and returning to Cedar Rapids as quickly as possible."

Jessie uncrossed his legs and jumped to his feet. "What are you talking about, you crazy old Chinaman?"

Ching Lo stared up and down the slim figure of Jessie Spears. "Exactly what this one has just spoken," said Ching Lo. "You can not ever become a man and you already know it."

Jessie grabbed Ching Lo. "Don't talk to me like that!" Jessie shouted, a hysterical ring shaking his voice. "I'll dress and live as I damn well please." Grubstake lumbered to his feet.

"I told you Jessie wasn't going to like this, Ching Lo," said Grubstake. "We'd better be riding for Bear Creek. It's a dark night."

Ching Lo pulled away from Jessie. "Yes. It is indeed a dark night. It can only be made brighter by the clear decision of one person."

They began a slow pace toward where they had left their horses. "Wait!" Jessie shouted. "Don't leave me yet. We haven't talked any. You haven't told me the news in Bear Creek. I'm sorry, Ching Lo. I didn't mean to blow my top. Grubstake, aren't you still my friend?"

THEY STOPPED and looked back. Jessie had pulled off his hat. Will sucked in a gasping breath that left him numb. He saw the soft hair unroll over the doeskin jacket. Jessie paused alongside the flickering blaze of the fire. Will could clearly distinguish the face and eyes. His mouth gaped open and he chokingly swallowed twice.

Jessie Spears was none other than Ellie Saunders.

It was unbelievable. Ellie, his deserted wife, was the Phantom Kid. Then the saddle bum she had run off with must have soon tired of her, Will figured. And this was the way she had stayed alive all these years. Perhaps she had hoped that a rancher's bullet would end her for good. Will shook his head, still not wanting to believe it. She must have been pretty brave to have eaten her pride all these years.

Grubstake waved his hand. "It's best this way, Jessie. You think it over carefully. You go back to Cedar Rapids and find your husband. Maybe he's still waiting for you."

Ellie uttered an ugly laugh. "Yeah, Grubstake. He just happens to be a U. S. marshal. You think all these years Will Evans would soil his hands on a tramp like me. So maybe I made a fool mistake. I'll continue to chew what little pride and respect there's left in this dirty tramp." She reached out her hand. "Please, Grubstake, you two don't leave me just yet. I'm terribly lonely. Please, stay longer with me."

Ching Lo slowly shook his head. "You will one day find yourself again. The sane course of life is not always a pleasant one. The reward will be an even greater profit if you will stop all this and start over again."

They turned and went to their horses. They mounted and quickly rode off. Ellie ran after them for a few feet, then stopped. She could beg herself hoarse, but it would do no good. She stumbled back to the fire and fell down on her knees. She looked up and openly prayed. There was only the rustle of the night wind through the trees. She sprawled face downward and the bitter, regretful sobs shook the length of her slim body.

When at last Ellie looked up, she gave a startled cry. She saw only the pair of black, dusty boots before her wet eyes. When she had seen the height of the man, she bit hard on her hand. Ellie stared a long time at the immobile figure of Will Evans. Then she reached out and gently touched his leg. It was as if she wanted to make certain he was real.

She hugged his boots, looked up at him, and desperately begged, "Oh Lord, Will. Please help me." She reached up, as if grasping for a last straw. Will seized her wrists and pulled her up to him. Ellie swayed heavily against him. She gasped, "I—I'm not even asking for a dog's chance, Will. Just—just take me back in any way you wish." She moaned and went limp in his arms. He picked her up and immediately noticed how thin and light she had become over the lost years. Her head rested on his shoulder and he noticed the tight lines across her tan, hollow cheeks.

Will began walking toward her horse. He held her tighter to his aching chest. "Why, Ellie, why?" he whispered. But her eyes were closed and she didn't hear him. Marshal Sears had a big, warm heart. Will knew there was a chance for Ellie.

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ALLIES FOR BOOT HILL

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Ezra Darrell knew full well that the word of a man like Hagen was worthless. But he had to make this temporary alliance...

DARRELL rode into the roaring boomtown called Hell's Acres that night, and this was his homecoming, this was his town; but there was no pleasure in it. He had none of the sensations a man was sup-

posed to feel, coming back to his own part of the country, the first time in eight years. There was no soaring nor singing in his heart; his heart was a cold thing in his chest.

A stringy built, long drink of water Ezra Darrell was, slumped in the saddle of the big grey, but with that lean, tensile strength in his rangy body that lanky men often have. Dressed simply in a sweat-stained blue work shirt, red neckerchief and rumpled levis, at first impression Darrell looked like just another saddle-bum. But then you saw the new, flat-crowned black Stetson tied under-chin with a leather thong and the expensive hand-tooled black boots. You saw the sleek, pearl-handle twin .44's in their black holsters. You looked at the high-boned, beard-stained cheeks and the cold flat gaze of the gray eyes between them, the wide, taut mouth and the continually restless movement of the long, quick-looking hands of Darrell. And you changed your mind about Ez Darrell.

He suddenly reined the big grey to one side as a string of ore and freight wagons, followed by an out-going stage, came thundering up Main Street and past him on great clouds of dust. Then he raised his head and loosened the reins and the grey jogged on. Past brightly flarelit honky tonks, gaming casinos and saloons, Darrell rode, his eyes, from under their thin ledges of black brows, taking everything in. A slightly sardonic grin curled the corners of his mouth as he saw the names of these places on the great signs that hung over the false-fronted buildings. The names of the buildings were different, but each had something in common. In smaller letters under the names of most of Hell's Acres' Main Street establishments, were the words: L. Hagen, Prop.

Darrell turned the grey into the livery stable and blacksmith shop at the end of the street. A squat man, naked to the waist and with perspiration sheening his great, muscle-bound torso came through the red glow from the forges. He had black walrus mustaches and dancing brown eyes. He and Darrell exchanged greetings and Darrell issued instructions for the care of the grey.

Then he asked, "Ezra Darrell doesn't own this stable any more?"

The smithy shook his shaggy-haired head, wiped sweat from his forehead with his forearm. "Uh-uh. Not for three-four years, now. Ez Darrell sold out to Luke Hagen, just like the rest of the Darrells and everybody else around here."

The blacksmith's powerful shoulders shrugged. "Got himself kilt. Some saloon fight or somethin'."

DARRELL turned and left the stable. Out on the plank walk of Main Street, he moved toward the saloons, pushing through crowds of miners and mule-skinners and laughing, drunken, gold-camp riff-raff. He had trouble, making his way and he remembered back to when a half a dozen people all in a group, would have been a crowd here on Main Street. The jostling of the mob made him a little angry and he began to use his shoulders more than he should. Several men he bumped resented it and started to reach for him. Then they saw the set of his head, the hard shine of his eyes and the muscle ridging the rim of his jaw, and decided to forget about it.

He came to what had once been Sam Darrell's Barber Shop. It was now the Hells Acres Tonsorial Parlor; L. Hagen, Prop., he went inside anyhow and bought himself a haircut, shave and a bath in the backroom from a tub of dingy looking rainwater. All the barbers were strange to him and the place had been all changed over, fancied up. He remembered, bitterly,

getting his first shave in this place and how proud and flustered he'd been when old Sam, his father's cousin, had laughed and asked him: "You want I should use a razor or just rub some cream on and let the cat lick off that fuzz."

But there had been a satisfactory scraping of the blade against his beard, later and he had felt better when Sam, chuckled and told him: "You make me feel plumb old. Little Ez Darrell, Big Ed's younker, growed-up and growin' whiskers, already."

Being in that barber shop, remembering things like that, hadn't done Ezra Darrell any good. It brought temper rising hot and unruly to his head, knowing that old Sam, and Big Ed, his father, were dead now, and how they had gone. And that wasn't good, so he fought it off, because he had to keep his wits and remain deliberate and cold-blooded about this job he had to do.

The information he got in the barber shop did him some good, though. It was a gossip center and a few casually dropped questions and remarks brought him a lot of talk. His suspicion that Luke Hagen, who had taken over and made himself king of this little helltown, wasn't liked and had made some powerful enemies, was confirmed. He made a mental note of the names, Kirk Burnham and Matt Patterson, who were apparently prominent in the unorganized opposition against Hagen's strong-arm reign. He also heard a lot of mention of the name Rupe Calligy, who seemed to be Hagen's right hand and almost equally hated.

After the barber shop, Darrell's next call was at the Acres House, the town's hotel. A runty little man in a celluloid collar and with great square, hornrimmed glasses over his myopic eyes, was behind the desk. As he registered for a room, Ez asked, "You got any other Darrells registered, right now?"

The desk clerk's prominent Adam's apple made a fast hop between his receeding chin and the celluloid collar. "Darrell?" he repeated the name in a hushed tone, almost a whisper. "Hell, man, ain't been no Darrell in Hell's Acres, three-four years, right after the first gold strike up on Big Hatchet Mountain. All died or was druv out—one or t'other." He leaned closer. "That ain't exactly a healthy name to mention around town much, son. I just thought I'd better warn..." He broke off suddenly, gulping. "You said, 'any *other* Darrells.' You one of 'em?"

The clerk pushed his face down close to the register, traced the signature with his forefinger. "Ezra Darrell, Hell's Acres. Well, I'll be..."

"I been away," Ez said. "I've just come home. If I'm not back in a couple of hours to use that room, you might as well let somebody else have it." He turned and strode out of the hotel and into the bedlam of Main Street again.

A LETHARGY stole over Darrell, now. He'd ridden far today, and the strain of coming back and seeing what had happened to his home town of Hell's Acres had been strong. All the things he'd heard about the town and what had happened to his father and his kinfolk, had been difficult to believe. He'd known them to be true of course. There had been no reason for Ab Zenger to make up something like that. But coming home and seeing the absolute, concrete proof was still a shock; now reaction was trying to set in. After the bath and shave, the strain and tiredness was telling on him. He would be glad when the thing that he had to do first was over and he could come back and grab a good

night's sleep, to rest up for the big, long job ahead of him.

He came into the great flickering orange glow of the flares that lit up the facade of the *Gold Ring Saloon and Gambling Casino*. A bulbous-nosed barker in his warped and dented tophat and shabby finery, grabbed Darrell's arm and chanted the come-on into his face. Ez shoved the barker roughly away.

He looked up at the sign that had once said, simply: *Big Ed Darrell's Place*. L. Hagen, Proprietor wasn't marked on this sign; it didn't have to be. The title of the place was an obvious twist of its owner's name. This was the part of his job that Darrell didn't like. But he had promised Ab Zenger before he died and if Darrell waited until later, he might not be alive to carry out that promise. He drew a deep breath and pushed through the batwings into *The Gold Ring*.

WHEN DARRELL'S father had owned this place, when Hell's Acres was just another little cowtown and stage coach terminal, it had been more than just a saloon. It had been sort of a town meeting place, where Big Ed and the rest of the Darrells held sway and settled differences and disputes for the rest of the town's small business men. Gun rule had just about died out there, under the wise and friendly jurisdiction of Big Ed and his kinfolk.

Young Ezra saw just how much that had all changed now. Blue smoke hung in thick strata over the saloon. The roistering noise of the place rang in his eardrums. Lawlessness ran rampant, he saw. At a table near the door, Darrell saw a painted, bleached-blonde percentage girl boldly pick the pocket of a drunken miner. At another table, a pallid-faced, black-suited gambler, cold sober, was double-dealing to a group of worn, bleary-eyed mule-skinners, hardly able to sit up in their chairs.

Hagen had installed a huge set of second-hand, battered looking crystal chandeliers. Their gaudy light shone down through the fog of smoke. The bar had been lengthened and was jammed three deep. The rest of the room was cluttered with gambling tables. In the back of the place was a small stage, that held a broken down piano and the tall, crimson-gowned figure of a woman.

The piano was clanking out the ragged beat of a jig-time tune and the woman was singing with it, her voice barely distinguishable above the general hubbub of the saloon. She was a tall woman, Darrell saw, with a matured, fully-rounded figure. Her sunset-red hair was piled up in a high pompadour. Her eyes looked enormously dark in the creamy whiteness of her face. She didn't look anything like her brother, Ab, this Marcia Zenger. She didn't look anything like the gangly pig-tailed kid she had been when Darrell had left home, six years before, either. But he would have known that thatch of red hair any where.

He watched her come down off the stage, now, as the piano stopped its thumping, the song ended and he pushed through the dense jumble of tables toward her. Just before he reached her, she sat down at one of the tables near the stage. There was a man sitting there at that table, waiting for her. He poured whiskey from a bottle into a thick tumbler and held it up in a toast to Marcia Zenger, as she sat down.

As he walked toward them, Darrell saw that the man at the table with Marcia was a massive bear of a fellow. He had a huge, bullet-shaped head, topped with close-cropped, corn-colored, curly hair. His misshapen features sprouted a thick growth of pale beard stubble that reached up right

under his tiny sunken eyes. The head set, almost neckless, on sloping bull-shoulders. A cowhide vest, trimmed with fancy hand-stitching, hung loosely over a stained and dirty red wool shirt. The hand that held the tumbler of whiskey had fingers like sausages and the back of it was covered with matted blonde hair.

Darrell stood by their table and looked down at Marcia Zenger, ignoring the man. He said, brusquely: "I've got a message from your brother Ab. If I could speak to you a moment, alone..."

"Ab!" Marcia Zenger's green eyes stared up at him out of the pale, powdered beauty of her face. She looked scared and shocked. "Ab—my brother's been dead for nearly two years. I —I received notification from the government. He died in a Union Hospital. I..."

"I know." Darrell cut her off. "I was with him. I was with him when he got a Johnny Reb ball in his lung. I got it in the hip and the shoulder, the same time. I was in the same hospital with him, in the next bed when he died."

She put her hand up over her eyes for a moment, then looked up at him again. "I—I thought you looked familiar," she said, "You— You're Ez Darrell! Ab wrote once that he—that you and he were together."

A gutteral sound came from the man across the table from Marcia. He lunged up to his feet and the chair fell over behind him. His enormous overhang of belly hit the table and the tumbler over-turned and whiskey sloshed across the table, ran dripping over the edge.

"Darrell!" the big man roared. "I thought we'd cleaned out that clan. I thought every dirty dog of a Darrell was dead or long-gone from here. Where the hell did you come from?"

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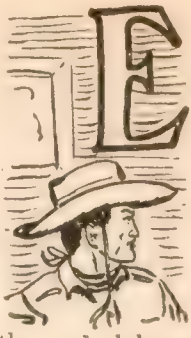

EZ DARRELL'S gray eyes took the other man in, with one sweeping glance. He saw the towering height, the powerful, barrel-thick chest and long, gorilla-like arms. He hooked thumbs into his gun-belt and felt the red dabs of temper flushing his thin cheeks and the hot core of anger balling into flame inside his gut.

Somehow, he held himself in check. He said through his teeth: "Look, brother, I don't know you and I don't want any trouble with you. All I want is a word with Marcia Zenger here and then I'll leave you alone. Savvy?"

The big man swayed on his spraddled feet. His head hung forward a little. His small, moist mouth curled in contempt. "He don't want no trouble, he says. Then you'd better git away from this here gal, pronto, Darrell, cause she ain't Marcia Zenger no more. She's Marcia Hagen. Mrs. Hagen. And the boss don't want no coyote whelp of the Darrell clan botherin' her, either." He reached his big hands toward Darrell.

Ez Darrell dropped his hands to his gun butts. He said, quietly: "Stay away from me, Calligy. I guess that's who you are. I heard about you."

Rupe Calligy dropped his fists, warrily eyeing Darrell's restless fingers caressing the twin 44's. He laughed a roaring, booming sound in the sudden silence of the saloon. At surrounding tables, men had suddenly stopped their merriment, the laughter and the talking.

"So you've heard of me, eh, Darrell?" Calligy roared. "Well, I've heard of you, too. You were the only

one of your breed lucky enough not to be around when Luke and I cleaned out the town, here. You'd gone away, they said, looking for a little excitement as a cheap, hired gun-slick down around the border. Then you decided to play tin soldier with a lot of other locoed young fools in a dam' silly war. You..."

"Shut your big mouth, Calligy!" Darrell stopped him. He felt his wrists throbbing with anger; he stood statue stiff, all his muscles aching and taut.

Calligy's fat-buried little eyes flicked toward Darrell's gun. "If you weren't packin' all that hardware," he growled, "I'd heist you up and heave you from here clean out through those batwings without bouncin' once! Like all the Darrells, you only talk large when you've got a man at a disadvantage."

Slowly, Ez Darrell lifted his long fingers from the butts of his .44's, to the gun belt, unhooked it. He took the belt off, draped it carefully over the back of a nearby chair, stepped back, his fists flexing, then balling at his sides. "I'm a little sick of shooting," he said, dead-low. "I'll like it better this way. It'll be a pleasure to have you try to make good on that braggin'."

A GRIN SPLIT Rupe Calligy's ugly features, showed his yellow, scraggled teeth. He lifted his huge arms from his sides and took a slow, deliberate step toward Darrell. A heavy chuckling came from his chest.

Ez waited, watching the other man closely. He felt a little bit foolish, now. He'd done his share of rough-hand-tumble in dozens of barrooms along the border; but he'd never tackled a mountain of a man like Calligy. Doubts crept into his mind as to whether he could handle the big man. He knew suddenly, from the leer of the other man's face that this would be a fight to the death. He wished now that he hadn't let the other man goad him into it. Not that he was afraid of dying; he'd been too close to death, too many times, on the battlefields and in gun-brawls before that, to have any fear of that left. But he'd come here for two reasons: to tell Marcia about her brother Ab, and to settle with Luke Hagen, the man who had cheated and tricked the Darrells out of their rightful places in Hell's Acres —and then had them killed.

Now, if he lost this fight with Rupe Calligy, both those missions would remain unaccomplished.

He braced himself for Calligy's savage onslaught as the big man started his lunge. But it never came. A shot suddenly rang out and glass chipped and flew from one of the chandeliers and the fixture swayed and swung on its hangings, its lamps flickering.

Both Calligy and Darrell swung about toward the door of the saloon, in surprise. They saw four men standing there, just inside the batwings. They were poorly, roughly dressed, in faded levis and dirty checkered workshirts. They held drawn Colts in their hands.

One of them stepped forward from the others a little. The Colt in his right hand still dribbled smoke from the shot that had rocked the chandelier. He was tall and skeleton thin, his face like a skull's, the skin pulled like dry parchment over the bone structure. His eyes burned bright and feverish deep in their hollowed sockets. He was hatless and strands of his long, unkempt black hair straggled down across his pony forehead.

Darrell heard a man at a table behind him, whisper: "Kirk Burnham! I knowed the trouble between him and Hagen was goin' to come to a head, soon!"

Kirk Burnham showed the stumps of his blackened teeth momentarily in a quick grin. He said in a nasal twang: "Y'all sit tight right where y'are at your tables. Nobody moves a hand, nobody gets hurt. Course, if y'all want

a mite of excitement, it's all right with us."

He paused and nodded toward the man to his right, a short, bowlegged stocky man, with a moon face and wide, vacuous, pale blue eyes. He added: "M'pard, Matt Patterson, here, has a half notion to shoot up this hell-hole, as it is. It wouldn't take much to get him started."

He waved his Colt-filled hand. "Spread out boys. Keep your eye on ever'body and smoke down the first one who moves a hair. I aim to do a little palaverin' with that big tub o' blubber, Calligy."

Kirk Burnham crossed the saloon, with long, ambling strides. He stopped a couple of yards away from Calligy and Darrell. He grinned at Darrell, said: "Looks like we busted up a little set-to between you and barrell-belly, here, stranger. Whoever you are, I admire the way you was standin' up to him and I'm sorry to interfere."

CALLIGY snorted, snarled: "What's the idea of this, Burnham? When Hagen hears about it, he'll have you and your little pack of rats strung up right in the middle of Main Street."

"Don't reckon he will," Kirk Burnham drawled. "Calligy, you and Hagen been running this town too damned long. We tried to get together enough men to take you over and run you out. But we couldn't recruit moren' a couple with gizzards enough to buck you. So we're usin' strategy, instead o' force."

Burnham jerked his head toward Marcia Hagen. "You," he ordered, gruffly, "Hagen's wife, come over here."

Marcia twisted her hands, nervously. She looked from Darrell and Calligy to Burnham. Her large green eyes stared fascinated at the Colt in Burnham's skinny hand as it swung slightly toward her. "You heard what I said!" Burnham said, sharply.

Darrell knew Burnham's breed. He'd gun-fought a lot of them, down around the border. He knew that Burnham and Matt Patterson weren't fighting Luke Hagen from any altruistic motive. They merely wanted to take the reign of power over the boomtown away from Hagen and use it themselves. They were coyote-mean and desperate men, who would shoot first and ask questions after.

Knowing this, Ezra Darrell said, quietly: "Marcia, you'd better do like he says. He means business!"

Slowly, Marcia Hagen edged toward Kirk Burnham who was saying, now: "Since we can't take the town Calligy, we're goin' to leave you have it all to yourselves. But first we're goin' to milk it."

Burnham reached out and grabbed Marcia's wrist, with his free hand, as soon as she came close enough. She tried to twist free but his long, bony fingers held her powerless. "We're takin' Miz Hagen with us, Calligy. We'll be holed up in the cave on the South side of Big Hatchet. If Hagen wants to get her back safe, tell him to come out there alone, tomorrow, with fifty thousand dollars in cash!"

"He—he ain't got that much cash on hand!" Calligy exploded. "You're a crazy damned fool, Burnham, to think Hagen's gonna let you get away with this!"

"He'd *better* raise that dinero, somewhere," Kirk Burnham said. He stooped, quickly and grabbed Marcia around the waist, slung her over his thin shoulder. She kicked and squirmed and beat at his back with her fists but Kirk Burnham only grinned as he backed toward Matt Patterson and the other two men who were covering him.

The other three waited until Burnham got outside and mounted with his prisoner, before they made their move toward the door. At the last moment, their Colts roared as they threw a shower of lead over the heads of the crowd. Then they turned and were

gone on a rataplan of pounding hoofbeats, with a last thin scream of the girl they had kidnapped, hanging in the night air.

Everyone in the *Gold Ring* sat thunderstruck for a moment. Then several men reached for their irons, scrabbled toward the door. "Hold it!" Darrell yelled. "You can't shoot after them; you might hit the girl!" He reached out and grabbed his own belt and holstered guns from the chair-back, slung them around his hips.

Rupe Calligy turned on him. "You're mixed up in this, Darrell. You came sashayin' in here and purposely started trouble with me so as to take everybody's attention and let them sidewinders get the drop on the place."

"Don't talk like a damned fool!" Darrell told him. "I never saw those hombres before in my life. Where's Luke Hagen, anyhow? How come he's not here tonight?"

"He's away," Calligy said. "He's due back in on the mornin' stage. He's been down to Black River on business. There's goin' to be plenty hell to pay when he finds out about this."

"Yeah," Darrell admitted. "But I got a notion it'll be Hagen who does the payin'. That cave on south side of Big Hatchet can be held by a few men for weeks, if they got enough stores in. And don't forget you won't be able to go bustin' in on 'em; they have Marcia."

HE WATCHED that reasoning penetrate the big man's confused brain, saw him sit down hard in a chair and put his head between his hands. Darrell said: "Looks like we'll have to put off our little showdown for awhile, Calligy. But I ain't forgetting the poison you shot off out of your mouth tonight. You tell Hagen that he can find me down at the Acres House, when he gets in tomorrow. Maybe I can figure some way for him to get his wife back."

Darrell hitched up his gunbelt then and with the eyes of every man in the place on him strode out of *The Gold Ring*.

Up in his hotel room, Ezra Darrell sprawled out on the narrow iron-runged bed and forced the things that had happened tonight out of his mind. Exhaustion crept over him and in a few minutes he was dead to the world.

A little after sunup, the next morning, Darrell was up and dousing his face with the fetid water in the cracked bowl on his dresser, when a knock sounded on the door. Toweling his face dry, he swung the door open to find Rupe Calligy and another man standing there. He stepped aside and they entered the room. Calligy, his eyes still puffy with sleep said nothing, just glared at Ez Darrell.

The other man was about average height, compactly built. He wore an expensive store-bought black frock coat, and a silk shirt with a black, shoe-string tie. A silver-mounted Colt was holstered against one hip. He had a freshly barbered, full-jawed face, with just the slightest trace of jowel. His mouth was a thin, pink line, with deep parenthesis-like marks grooving toward it from each side of his hawk-like nose. His eyes were long and narrow, a yellow-flecked amber color.

In a deep resonant voice, he said: "I'm Luke Hagen, Darrell. Calligy, here, said something about you having an idea how to help me get my wife back from those cowardly blackguards who abducted her last night."

Darrell went over and sat back down on his bed. He picked up his boots, shined them briskly on the sleeve of his shirt before putting them on. Then he stood up again.

"Hagen," he said. "I'm going to be honest with you; I hate your guts. I came here with a perhaps foolish notion to wage a one-man war against you because you came to Hell's Acres when the town started booming and using every dirty trick in the book, cheat-

ed and robbed my kinfolk out of their homes and businesses and took over the town. When you were through with that, all the Darrells and any others who had sided with them, sort of disappeared, or got shot-up in a faked barroom brawl."

Hagen's eyes shifted from Darrell for a moment. The corner of his thin mouth twitched. He shrugged. "This suddenly became a hell town, Darrell. It was every man for his own self. There were no rules. I happened to be lucky."

"Don't try to hooraw me!" Darrell told him, heatedly. And then he got control of himself, sighed. "Right now, that's beside the point. Right now, because of your wife's danger, Hagen, I'm willing to forget our differences for awhile. If we join forces, I've got an idea how we can rescue her from the Burnham-Patterson gang."

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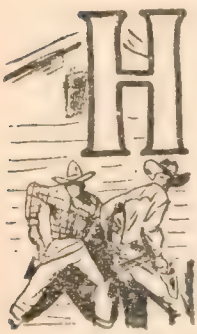

HAGEN'S amber eyes narrowed. "Just what is your interest in Marcia, Darrell?" he demanded.

Ez Darrell took a deep breath. "It's a long story. Marcia's brother, Ab, and I were buddies in the Army. He died on a hospital bed next to me, of wounds, received, fighting alongside of me. Just before he died, he made a request."

"What was that?"

"Ab didn't know Marcia had married you. Last he'd heard, she was just working for you, singing in your saloon. Anyhow, Ab got married, up north, just before he went away to fight. His wife had a little girl, but there was some trouble at birth and Mrs. Zenger never got over it. She died. Some neighbors are taking care of Ab's kid. He made me promise that I'd get to Marcia and tell her about this. Get her to go up and get the younker and make a home for it."

"That's ridiculous," Hagen snorted. "I don't see where that's any concern of Marcia's or mine. The child is probably better off with the people that have it now."

"That's for Marcia to decide," Darrell said. "But she can't do much about it where she is now. I think I can help you get your wife back, safely, Hagen, if you promise me one thing?"

"That is?"

"You'll let Marcia go up and get Ab's little girl, let her make a home for it. You do that and I'll help you get Marcia back. And I'll leave town, forget about the revenge I was going to get for what you did to my folks. It's more important that Ab's child is taken care of. You're rich and can give it every advantage. I owe it to Ab to see that it works out that way."

Luke Hagen paced up and down the room, briefly, his brand new shiny boots creaking slightly. Different expressions flitted over his heavy features. Finally he stopped in front of Darrell. "What's your plan in getting Marcia out of the hands of Burnham and Patterson? I'll do anything to get her back safely, Darrell."

"That's on your oath?"

Hagen raised his right hand and leaned forward intently as Darrell said: "It's a simple plan, but because of that, I think it'll work. Kirk Burnham saw that I was having a fuss with your man, Calligy, here, last night. They probably have heard about the Darrells and what happened to them. When I go to them and tell them who I am and that I want to join forces with them, I think they'll believe me."

Hagen looked startled. "What do you mean?"

Darrell gestured simply with his hands. "It only takes one man to guard the entrance to that cave. You and Calligy can hide back out of sight and I'll approach the cave alone. I'll tell

whoever's guarding the entrance, my story. I think they'll be glad of the chance to get an extra man on their side, in case there should be any trouble. If I get a chance, then and there, I'll overpower the guard, and then signal you two. We can enter the cave then and catch the others by surprise. If the guard is too suspicious and doesn't give me a chance, I'll get him to call the others out to check. When they all get out there in the open, away from Marcia, inside, you and Calligy, can drop them from your hiding place."

Hagen thought about that, his full-featured face, creased with frown lines. Rupe Calligy slapped his big hands together, said, excitedly: "You know that ain't a bad idea, Mr. Hagen. It's just loco enough that it might work."

Snapping his fingers, Hagen said, abruptly. "It's worth a try, Darrell. Can you leave right away?" When Darrell nodded, he went on: "I'll have Rupe saddle some horses for us and we'll meet you in front of the saloon."

EZ DARRELL nodded grimly and picked up his gunbelt, fastened it on, as the other left the room. A few minutes later, he walked down the ricketty steps and out onto the Main Street, deserted now, practically, in the strong early morning sunlight. With the glow of the flares gone, in the deadly revealing light of the sun, the main street of Hell's Acres, with its false-fronted buildings, had lost its glamor and excitement. It looked like what it was, now, a dirty little trail town that had suddenly grown too big for its own breeches and had sprawled from the center into a cancerous growth of little shacktowns and tent cities.

Shivering a little in the cool morning air and gloomily reflecting on the ironic twist fate and the team of Burnham and Patterson had given his plans, Darrell clumped along the plank walk to meet and join forces with his sworn enemies.

The three men rode out of Hell's Acres onto the old stage coach trail that led to the south side of Big Hatchet mount, whose craggy peak towered into the blue haze of morning, about ten miles away. None of them spoke the whole distance and it was mid-morning and sweating hot in the glaring sun, when they turned off the trail, finally, at the foot of the mountain and started up a narrow, boulder-clogged old Indian trail that led into Lost Horse Canyon.

Darrell's lean features were dust-caked and his shirt clung clammily to his back. Rupe Calligy puffed and fumed and cursed alternately at the heat and sun and at Burnham and Patterson for bringing on this situation. Luke Hagen rode stolidly silent, looking at neither of the other men. Both he and Calligy carried Winchesters as well as the sixguns slung around their hips.

Lost Horse Canyon was a long dead-end cut in the side of the mountain about a mile from the foot. The three men rode along the bed of a dried up stream that ran along the bottom of the canyon, the echo of their mounts' hoofbeats clanging back and forth between the steep cliffs that rose up on each side of the canyon.

About a mile into the canyon, just before it made a sudden sharp turn, Ezra Darrell reined in his mount. "We'd better proceed from here on foot. Sound carries between these cliffs and they might hear the echo of our horses' hoofs on the rock. We can't take any chances."

Stiffly, they dismounted, tethered the horses to some scrub pine and made their way along the rocky old river bottom. When they came to the turn in the canyon, Darrell put out his arms and stopped them. Softly, he said: "The cave is half way up the cliff, just around the turn. If you and Calligy climb up from this side, you'll

be completely hidden." He pointed up to a needle-like projection of rock protruding from the side of the cliff. "When you reach that sharp point of rock, you'll be just a little above the level of the cave, so that you can look down onto the entrance. When you get there, don't climb any higher, but move forward and around the curve. I'm going to go up the regular trail, facing the cave. I'll make a lot of fuss to attract the guard's attention and to cover up any noise you make, climbing."

DARRELL moved on, then, around the canyon curve and looked up. There was an almost natural zig-zag trail through the rocks and up the precipice-like side of the canyon. At the end of it, halfway up the cliff, was the mouth of the cage. There was an over-hang of rock above it and on either side, completely vertical and worn so smooth by some ancient erosion that it would be impossible to climb up or down it. Thus the only possible access to the cave was by the route Darrell was taking. And he was completely at the mercy of anyone above, having to use both hands and feet in the steep climb.

Before he'd gone very many yards up the cliff, a voice echoed out over the canyons: "Stand where you are. Climb another step and you get cut down!"

Ez Darrell recognized the whining drawl of Kirk Burnham. He cupped his hands and shouted back: "Don't shoot! I just want to palaver with you It's Ez Darrell. I want to join your gang!"

There was moment's hesitation, then the voice ordered: "Shuck your hardware, then. Leave it down there and come up nekkid!"

Darrell unhooked his gunbelt and hung it over a sharp jut of rock, then began to climb again. Several minutes later, he came out into the small, level clearing in front of the cave. In the dim darkness of the cave's mouth, he could see the slight movement of a blurred figure, the momentary glint of the sun on a rifle barrel.

Somehow, Darrell forced a grin onto his taut features and with hands the dark mouth of the cave. When he was still a few yards away, Kirk Burnham ordered: "Stand! Mebbe you're all right and mebbe you're not. You're the young galoot was about to tear into Rupe Calligy, last night when we busted things up at the *Gold Ring*. That's a point in your favor. What do you want? Did you say your name was Darrell? Has a familiar ring."

Swiftly Ez told the tall, skinny outlaw guard about the Darrells and what happened to them in Hell's Acres. When he'd finished, Burnham said: "I reckon you've rightly got cause for a grudge agin that sidewinder, Hagen. Mebbe we could use an extra man. A good one. Understand, though, you git no split from this kidnap job. The dirty work's been done on that."

"I wanted no part in it, anyhow," Darrell said. Then for a moment sweat broke out all over him. He could feel it running down over his ribs and along the groove of his spine. There was a long silence from the cave and Darrell figured he'd said the wrong thing. The slightest thing might turn suspicion against him at this point and he knew that Kirk Burnham wouldn't have the slightest compunction about gunning him down, if necessary. He held his breath.

Then Burnham said: "All right. You just stand for a minute, while I call the others to look you over and see what they think about it. If this is any kind of trick or trap, Gawd help you, mister!"

EZ DARRELL heard Burnham's voice, then, muffled and hollow

sounding, as he turned and shouted back into the depths of the cave: "Matt, bring the boys out here! We got company!"

Darrell stood there with his hands still upraised, his arms beginning to ache a little. His ears felt as though they were quivering, so hard was he listening for the turning of a stone or the falling of a piece of loosened rock, over to the right, where he knew Hagen and Calligy were hiding, watching. That would be all he'd need. Burnham and the others would know what was up, immediately.

Then he saw the figure in the mouth of the cave move and Kirk Burnham's long, stooped, cadaverous figure came out into the sunlight, a rifle crooked at-ready under his arm. Right behind him were Matt Patterson and the other two owlhooters,. They all stared curiously at Darrell as they walked slowly toward him, spread out, so that they could come at him from all sides if he made a wrong move.

Darrell waited until they were all well cut from under the protecting overhang of cliff and was just about to wriggle his fingers in the prearranged signal to Hagen and Calligy, when the pair beat him to it.

The sound of the shot beat its way back and forth between the walls of the canyon, its echo ringing, slamming at the eardrums again and again. Then there was the whine of the slug. And one of the men with Burnham and Patterson slowly let the rifle he was carrying, slip from under his arm. It fell to the ledge in front of the cliff. The man half turned, a surprised, stupid expression on his bearded face. His hand clawed at his chest and came away red. He went down in sections, like a puppet with the strings suddenly cut, never knowing what had happened to him.

Another shot followed and its echo joined in with the first, in a continuous clamor of sound. But this one missed, because Burnham, Patterson and the third man had jumped in alarm at the sound of the first shot. The second bullet ricocheted off a rock and went whining and singing out across the canyon.

"He's led us out here into a trap!" Kirk Burnham screamed and wheeled from the direction of the shots, toward Ezra Darrell squeezing trigger on his own rifle. But Darrell was no longer in the same spot. While Matt Patterson and the other man were thundering their own rifle fire up toward the roost of Hagen and Calligy, Darrell charged, bent double toward Kirk Burnham's scrawny figure. A slug riffled through his hair and he felt the heat of it. Then he crashed against Burnham's long, stringy legs, under the raised rifle. Burnham went crashing backward, full length, against the rock floor of the ledge.

Darrell scrambled on top of him, reached for the outlaw's throat but then he saw the way Burnham's lantern jaw sagged open and the way his eyes were rolled back into his head. Burnham would not give him anv more trouble. He'd cracked his head against the rock, was out cold.

Swiftly, he reached for Burnham's rifle and scrounged around, expecting bullets to come whistling at him from the rifle's of Burnham's confederates. But while he had been grappling with Burnham, Hagen and Calligy had made good with two more shots. Patterson was sprawled full length on his face, blood leaking from a bullet hole in his temple. The fourth man was spinning around on his toes like a dancer, his rifle flying from his suddenly stiffened fingers and hurtling out over the edge of the cliff. Then he walked stifflegged, pain-blinded toward the edge of the precipice and off of it in a six hundred foot drop to the floor of the canyon below.

Wildly, Darrell waved his arms and shouted for Hagen and Calligy to cease firing. Then he made for the

black, slot-like entrance to the cave. There was a narrow, low-ceilinged tunnel, along which Hagen had to stoop and then he suddenly came out into a large, flare-lit cavern. A bat swooped around his head for a moment as he moved toward a pile of supplies, stacked up at the far end of the cave. Roped by her wrists to an iron rung embedded in the wall of the cave, was Marcia Hagen.

She looked to be unhurt, he saw, except that her long red gown was ripped in several places and there were scratches and a bruise on her cheek. Her hair, too, had come down out of its high pompadour and hung loosely, now, about her shoulders like a cascade of gleaming molten copper. Her enormous green eyes were wide with fright as she looked toward Darrell and then she recognized him and some of the tightness went from her features. She began to cry and laugh at the same time.

Darrell calmed her down and explained what had happened, while he worked to untie her carefully knotted wrists. Then he rubbed her hands to get the circulation back in them. When he'd finished, he added, bitterly: "So you're free now. In a few minutes your gallant husband will be here to take you back home."

She looked hurt for an instant, then she said: "Ezra, what was the message from Ab?" Her voice was full of tenderness.

- 4 -

HE TOLD her, swiftly, watching the play of emotions across her cameo-like features. Near the end of the story, Marcia suddenly reached out and caught hold of his hands. Her lips pulled back in fear. "Ez, Ez!" she cried. "You believed that—you took Luke Hagen's word that he would let me go and get Ab's little girl and that we bring her up as our own?"

He nodded and she said: "Oh, Ez, you fool! Don't you know Hagen's word means nothing to him. He'd double-cross his own father! He'd have agreed to anything you suggested, knowing he didn't intend to keep his word. He won't do what he promised, Ez. My husband hates children. He..." Suddenly she broke off and grew pale. Ez!"

"What is it, Marcia?"

"Ez, she said, staring at him, wild-eyed. "You'd better get away from here. You're in danger, Ezra. Hagen and Calligy both hate the sight of a Darrell. Now that you've helped them out and they don't need you anymore, they'll kill you, Ez!"

His mouth pulled into a grim, straight line. He reached out and took hold of her shoulders, shook her a little. "So you know what kind of a rat your husband is, and still you married him. I don't trust his word; but I'd thought maybe you were just dumb and didn't understand what a dirty, conniving coyote he was. Or I thought maybe you were so blamed in love with him, you were blind to his faults or didn't care about them. But..."

"I—I'm not, Ez!" she interrupted. "I never loved Hagen. You've got to understand, Ezra. I never knew until after I married him, that he was responsible for the death of my own dad and for all the Darrells. After Dad died, Hagen was nice to me. He gave me a job, singing in his cafe. I was very young and lonesome and scared. When he finally asked me to marry him, I didn't know any better. Even though I knew I didn't really love him, I thought maybe I would grow to and that the marriage would work out for the best."

She broke off suddenly, a little sob in her throat. Then she went on; "I soon found out what a mistake I'd

made. We weren't married very long before Hagen showed his true colors. He made me continue to work in the saloon; taunted me with the story of how he'd killed my father. Several times I've tried to run away from him, Ez. But he always has that ape, Calligy watching me, guarding me. I finally gave it up."

Suddenly there was the sound of footsteps coming along the tunnel entrance to the cavern. Darrell put a finger to his lips, said: "Shh! Here they come!"

LUKE HAGEN and Rupe Calligy came into the light of the flares inside the cave, then, their rifles crooked in their arms. They walked straight over to Darrell and Marcia. Hagen made a stiff, mocking bow to his wife, his face white with temper, his amber colored eyes cold and shiny as bottle-glass.

"That was a very touching little story you told our friend, Darrell, here," he said, softly. "You should have spoken a little more quietly. Voices carry, here in the cave, my dear. We heard every word you said, didn't we, Rupe?"

The big man couldn't seem to tear his eyes away from Marcia. He kept staring at the burnished copper loveliness of her hair and moistening his thick lips with his tongue. "Yeah," he said, absently. "Sure, Mr. Hagen." His face began to work, the ugly features distorting, as though he was pondering some great problem, too much for his small brain.

Hagen stepped away from Calligy and brought up his rifle with the barrel pointed straight at Darrell's chest. "And now that our friend, here, has served his purpose to us, I think it's time to complete the demise of the Darrell clan. The Darrells stood for all that I've aways hated, mister. You're just like the rest of them." To Marcia, he said: "As for you, my dear, in punishment for shooting your miserable little mouth off before a stranger, you shall watch the execution. Watch closely, Marcia, what happens to the brave and honorable of the world. The fools, the men with scruples and codes to live by!"

Ezra Darrell watched Hagen's finger whiten on the trigger of the rifle. He felt his stomach seem to shrivel and knot-up. More with anger than with fear, though. At the same time, he taunted all his muscles and his nerve ends seemed to scream with strain. He got set to leap at Hagen. It was a loco notion and he knew he couldn't make it. But it wasn't in him to stand there and get shot down without resisting, like a cornered animal.

But just before Hagen's finger fully tightened around the rifle trigger, before Darrell made his leap into the face of death, he saw Rupe Calligy, suddenly circle around in back of Luke Hagen. Hagen abruptly stiffened and a look of surprise and horror slipped over his suave features as Calligy pushed his muzzle into Hagen's back.

Calligy's rough voice said: "Drop that rifle, Hagen. *I'm* going to have the pleasure of killing this Darrell." As Hagen's rifle clattered to the floor of the cave, Calligy went on: "And the pleasure of killing you, too, Mister. You've bossed me around long enough. I've been waiting a long time for a chance to get rid of you, without any suspicion being thrown onto me. We'll tell it back in town that both you and young Darrell got shot by the Kirk Burnham boys before I finally got them. I'm going to take over the town you've tamed so nicely, Hagen. And that pretty redheaded wife of yours will be free again. Mebbe she'll be so grateful to me for gettin' rid of you, Hagen, she'll learn to care for me a little bit. She sure couldn't hate me no worsen' she does you!"

"No, Rupe, no!" Marcia cried in protest. "Don't kill him. Please. For my sake!"

"Don't be a fool, Calligy!" Hagen said, quickly. His voice was trembling. He gave a nervous little laugh. "Maybe you're just hoorawing me, Rupe, eh? Is that it. You wouldn't really shoot down your old pard in cold blood, would you Rupe? Listen, maybe I haven't realized your full value to me. Suppose—suppose if we forget about this little scene, when we get back to town, I make you a full partner to all my holdings. We..."

"Cut it, Hagen," Calligy said, tightly. "I've heard your lyin' tongue before; it don't impress me none. This is one tight you don't spiel your way out of. So long, Hagen!"

LUKE HAGEN squealed with fright, his eyes rolling wildly; sweat rivuletted down his full, handsome features. He gibbered: "No, no, no, Rupe! You can't do this! You wouldn't dare, Rupe. I'll..."

"Wouldn't I?" Calligy asked, almost gently.

There was the muffled clap of a rifle shot. Hagen went up onto his toes, his whole body stiffening, his back arching jerkily against the full impact of the closeup shot. He made a gurgling sound in his throat and collapsed at Rupe Calligy's feet.

Calligy stepped back, his eyes flicking from Darrell to Marcia, who stood frozen with shock, her hand pressed tightly to her mouth, holding back a scream. Suddenly all the color went out of her face and her legs gave way. She toppled to the floor in a dead faint.

"It's just as well she keeled over," Calligy said, chuckling. "It wouldn't be nice for a lady to see this," Abruptly, he flung the rifle away from him, moved in a crouch toward Ez Darrell, his long, gorilla-like arms reaching. "Last night, Darrell, in the *Gold Ring*, you put on a tough hombre act. Now let's see how tough you really are. I'm going to tear you apart with my bare hands. I'm going to pop your eyes out like grapes, with my thumbs. I'm going to yank your arms out of their sockets. I'm going to throttle you until your tongue hangs out of your head like a slab of uncooked beef!"

Ez Darrell tensed himself and circled warily away from the big man. In the ghostly glare from pineknot torches stuck into the walls of the caves, Calligy's shadow loomed across the floor as huge as some prehistoric monster. Calligy looked mountain-big and the mad kill-glitter in his eyes made cold studs of sweat break out all over Darrell's body.

Calligy crooked a mammoth forefinger, teasingly. He knuckled his curly blonde head with his other hand. "C'mere, son!" he called, mockingly. "Don't try to get away from old Calligy. C'mere and let me bearhug the guts out of yuh, to show how much I like yuh!"

Darrell kept backing away and suddenly Calligy lunged like a crazed bull, swinging one arm in a mighty roundhouse blow. Darrell danced to one side and escaped the full force of the sledge-hammer blow. But it still caught him a glancing wallop across

the cheekbone, took skin and beard stubble with it, almost knocked Darrell's head from his shoulders. Darrell rocked on his feet and shook his head, groggily.

His vision cleared just as Calligy wheeled and lumbered back toward him. He ducked inside of Calligy's next blow and swung with all his weight at the big man's jutting jaw. He didn't use his balled fist. He used the heel of his hand and the blow landed squarely. But Calligy just grunted and shook himself like a great wounded grizzly and came at Darrell again.

This time, instead of swinging his fist at Darrell, Calligy bored in close, aimed a vicious kick of his boot at Darrell's kneecap, intending to smash it and cripple him. At the last moment, Ez Darrell twisted his leg just in time and took the blow on the inside of the thigh, instead. It numbed the leg but he knew the damage was only temporary.

HE STARTED to back away again and carefully watched the giant coming at him once more. Calligy had grown a little careless, now, though. He came on too fast, with his arms hanging loose and ape-like at his sides. Abruptly, Ezra Darrell dug in his toes, stopped and instead of retreating, rushed headlong at the larger man, doubled over. He felt his head ram solidly into Calligy's great belly. He heard the breath *whoosh* out of his opponents chest in great gusts. He straightened and saw that Calligy was doubled over slightly holding his guts. Any other man would have been flat on his back.

Darrell cut loose with two swings, a left and a right, bringing his hands up from the floor, the hard heels of them, landing with all his power against the big man's jaw on one side, his eye on the other.

Calligy let out a tremendous bellow of pain and rage, staggered sideways, hurt for the first time. With a little cry of triumph. Darrell tore in after him, hoping to deliver the finishing blows of the fight. But he was overanxious. He misjudged the damage done to Calligy. As he moved in close, Calligy suddenly reached out and gripped him under the armpits. He lifted Darrell, kicking and flailing his legs, high above his head and threw him, bodily across the cave.

Darrell landed against the rocky wall and slid down it, limply. The glare of the torches went on and off in his eyes. His body ached and pain ripped at his middle. He felt as though every bone in him was crushed. He lay there, gathering his strength, his breath tearing at his lungs.

He heard the pound of Calligy's footsteps coming toward him and rolled over just in time to see the big man's tremendous bulk come diving toward him. Once Calligy got him down like this, on top of him, Darrell knew, he was through. Calligy would kill him as he'd promised, inch by painful inch. In a wild burst of desperation, Darrell got to his feet up and doubled his legs back against his belly. He shot them out again as Calligy lunged down at him. The heels of his boots caught Calligy flush in the face and he tumbled sideways, roaring with pain, to the floor.

Ez Darrell scrambled to his feet, advanced toward Calligy, who was dazedly getting to his knees, now, his face a blood-oozing, swollen mess. Calligy tried to grab at his legs but he was too slow. Darrell side-stepped and swung the side of his hand hard against the side of Calligy's neck, in a knife-edged blow. The big man's monstrous head lolled and his eyes walled back. He screamed curses at Darrell and somehow staggered to his feet again.

Darrell stood for a moment, gathering his strength, trying to catch his breath, wiping some of the blood from head cuts, out of his own eyes. He was

surprised, now, to see that Calligy was moving away from him and toward the lifeless figure of Luke Hagen. Too late, Darrell realized that Calligy had given up the idea of trying to beat him to death with his fists. He was going to make a sure thing of it, now.

CALLIGY stooped over Hagen's body and tugged the deadman's silver mounted pistol from its holster. Darrell rushed at him, weaving. The sound of the pistol crashed loudly against the ceiling of the cave and Darrell felt the burn and sting of hot lead against his shoulder. The warm thickness of blood ran down his arm.

He reached the big man before he could fire another shot but Calligy clubbed at him with the pistol. Darrell took the blows across the back and shoulder and got up under Calligy's long arms. He jabbed the stiffened tips of his fingers in a short, vicious blow into Calligy's windpipe.

Calligy fell back, gagging, weak-kneed. The silver pistol fell from his numbed fingers. In a dark red rage that was the culmination of all the wrongs that had been done against him and his family by men of this breed, Darrell whipped after him. He slammed blow after blow into Calligy's face, driving the big man back against the wall of the cave.

Darrell only stopped when there was no more strength to lift up his arms, when there was no more breath in his chest and his legs would hardly hold him. He saw then that Rupe Calligy had been unconscious for a long time and that only the wall of the cave had been holding him upright. Darrell stepped out of the way as Calligy's mammoth body toppled stiffly forward, fell face-down like a felled ox, to the floor.

Ezra Darrell stood for a long moment, gasping, shaking himself all over, like a lean tough wolf-hound after a wilderness battle to the death with another animal. Then slowly, spraddle-legged, he walked over and sat down on a box of supplies, his head in his hands. The next thing he knew, he felt a gentle hand on his head. He looked up and it was Marcia.

She was standing over him and there was the look on her face of pride and concern and pity for his hurts, that he remembered seeing on the face of his mother when he was a kid and came in from a schoolyard fight, battered and torn.

"Poor Ez," Marcia said softly. Then she began to rip strips of cloth from the bottom of her gown and used them to make rough dressings for his wounds. Her hands felt cool and soft to his fevered skin and he couldn't keep his eyes off of her. When she was finished with the dressings and he had recovered enough strength, they left the cave together. They climbed down the cliff trail and walked to the horses.

On the long ride back to Hell's Acres, Darrell tried not to, but he couldn't help thinking and wondering, if maybe, after a reasonable length of time, he and Marcia—well, hell, if Marcia was going to bring up Ab's little girl, the kid would need a father to look out for it, wouldn't she? And who knows, maybe later, he thought it would be a good idea for the younker to have some other young'ns to keep her company.

Thinking that and looking from the corners of his eyes at Marcia, riding beside him, and catching her cutting her glance at him, too, occasionally, Darrell somehow didn't seem to mind the jogging of his bruised and aching body. And when, finally, Marcia brought her horse close and reached out and took his hand in hers, he found out that there was suddenly no more pain in him at all. He just felt as though he was floating through the air and he didn't hardly care if they never got back to Hell's Acres.

★

When any one of several parties may be involved in rustling and dry-gulching, that is the proper time to

Suspect Them All!

by Clare Hamilton

MART KRAMER was riding through a pinon bosque on Eagle Mesa when the click of metal broke the morning stillness. His gray eyes followed the direction of the sound, noted a sprawled man on the ground squinting down a rifle barrel, and sent the wandering cowboy into swift and dynamic action.

Kramer dove from his saddle with arms spread wide. The rifle exploded harmlessly as Kramer's muscled right shoulder drove the bush-whacker into the red dirt.

Both men slid a few inches toward the rim of the mesa and those few inches took skin from the rifleman's bony face. From down on the valley floor, a grim voice gave orders for both men to reach for the blue sky. Orders which were backed up by a 45-70 Winchester long gun.

Mart Kramer raised both hands and rolled to the side. Thudding hooves raced up the rocky trail. A tall lean cowboy topped the rise with a six-shooter in his bronzed right hand, and a curt question on his tight lips.

"Which of you hombres fined yore sights on Roper, my Dad?"

"He did," the rifleman answered quickly. "I was just in time to knock up his rifle!"

"I'm Al Bassett," the cowboy introduced himself to Kramer. "Who might you be?"

"I might be a rustler, but I'm not," Kramer drawled. "Just call me Mart Kramer. The skinned-up gent is lying. My saddle-gun is still in the scabbard under my left fender. He was aiming to dry-gulch your old man."

Kramer was medium tall, stockily built, and in his late twenties. Al Bassett looked him up and down, reading his brands and ear-markings. He did the same for the man with the skinned face, and demanded the stranger's name.

"I'm Glen Tyron," the rifleman answered readily. "Cattle Association

man. Sent up here from El Paso to look into this rustling business. Here's my papers."

Kramer frowned a trifle as the dry-gulcher gave his name. He watched young Bassett take the papers and read them carefully. As Bassett's face clouded, Kramer made a smooth pass for his holstered .45 and got the drop.

"Drop your hog-leg, Bassett," Mart said quietly, but his low voice was brittle. "You were going off half-cocked; was going to smoke me down on this gent's say-so. When you cut for rustler sign, you want to circle wide and look all over!"

Al Bassett stared, his gun in hand, but pointed to the ground. Ranch-bred and trail-wise, he knew when he was beaten. His gun dropped to the ground as he smothered an angry curse.

"Let's all move down and talk some to old Roper," Kramer suggested. "He's lived long enough to stand ground-hitched without hobbles. I'll shoot either one of you jiggers if you go on the prod. Climb yore saddle, Tyron."

Tyron mounted his horse without speaking, remembering that old Roper Bassett had rifle and six-shooter to even the odds. With Al in the lead and Kramer bringing up the drag, the three men rode down the mesa trail to the valley floor.

ROPER BASSETT was waiting with a Winchester cradled in the crook of his right arm. The gun snapped up when the old cattleman saw the naked pistol in Kramer's hand.

"Drop that six-shooter, Mister!"

Mart Kramer ignored the old cattleman's command. His pistol was pointed at young Al, and Roper Bassett was old enough to read sign. All of it. Mart knew that Roper would hold his shot.

"One of us two strangers was fixing to dry-gulch you, old-timer," Mart began to talk. "One of us saved your life by jumping the other jigger, and who do *you* think it was?"

"You're both strangers to me," Bassett muttered slowly. "I heard a rifle talk, and yours hasn't been fired recent. I'd say you jumped this other hombre and skinned his face up some."

"He changed guns with me," Tyron shouted. "I'm repping for the Cattleman's Association!"

"Could be that away," Bassett admitted hesitantly. "But what was to prevent him from killing both you and Al and then finishing up with me?"

"He lost his nerve," Tyron explained readily. "He figured there were too many witnesses!"

"Dead men don't talk much," Mart Kramer said quietly, and then he asked Bassett a question. "How come you to be burning your iron on a Circle Q calf, with the old cow standing by?"

"Looks bad, Roper," Tyron added thoughtfully. "You can't fool an old cow that away."

"If yo're repping for the Association, you tell me," Bassett answered fiercely. "I found this calf critter hog-tied, and stopped off for a look. That's when I hear the rifle explode up there on the mesa!"

"That's easy to read," Tyron explained. "The rustlers framed you with that set-up, to make you look guilty. Then they meant to kill you right over the proof!"

Mart Kramer tightened his jaw and his trigger-finger. His eyes were bleak and frosty when he spoke to Roper.

"I'm going to leave you here with Glen Tyron, Bassett. Drop that rifle before I let young Al have my lead!"

"Don't you do it, Dad," Al Bassett growled. "He might get me, but you can't miss him!"

Bassett slowly shook his head. He lowered his Winchester, tossed the rifle aside, and waved a hand at the timbered slopes.

"Ride away, Kramer," he said earn-

estly. "We've got mebbe six hundred head of stock on the Circle C, but Al is worth more than cattle. We'll ride rustler sign, and every man of us will carry a hang-rope on his saddle. *Vamos!*"

MART KRAMER was grim-faced as he sat saddle on the little mesa, watching the three men in the valley below. He knew cattle detectives and their methods, but he also knew the cattlemen of high New Mexico, having been one before an itching heel sent him riding the long trails.

Kramer watched Glen Tyron and tried to work out the puzzle. Tyron had meant to kill old Roper Bassett, who was the natural leader of the small cattlemen. It could be that Tyron had tagged old Roper for a rustler, in view of the evidence. Bassett had been caught red-handed over a Circle Q calf which had been freshly burned with the Circle C iron.

Young Al pulled the piggin' string and turned the calf loose. Tyron was on his horse, evidently giving orders. The three men rode in the direction Tyron had indicated with a sweep of his arm, and after watching a while, Kramer rode down from the mesa on the back trail.

Kramer reached Little Snake River at high noon and dismounted to loose his cinchas. He took a meat sandwich from his saddle-bags and ate slowly while his horse slaked its thirst. The horse raised its head when a small bunch of cattle came down to drink.

Old cows with calves at side, grazing an open range. Kramer studied several brands without interest. The cattlemen would form a pool for fall round-up, and after the gather, each owner would mark his tally books and drive his own stock to his home range for shipping.

Mart Kramer leaned forward with nostrils flaring. An old Circle C cow was giving suck to a Circle Q calf. Accidents can happen on any range, but Mart muttered to himself that they didn't happen in bunches. He counted seven Circle C cows with Circle Q calves, and his tawny eyes grew stormy.

Come weaning time, the calves would stray from their mothers. The Circle Q would have a heavy calf-crop, while Roper Bassett would have a lean tally.

KRAMER took a little book from an upper vest pocket and thumbed through the pages. He hawed in his throat as he stared at an open page. Talked to himself like lonesome men will do on the cattle range.

"Circle Q owned by an hombre name of Dyke Anselm," Kramer read aloud. "Came up here two years ago with two hundred head. I'd admire to see Anselm's tally books, and his headquarters are south aways on Little Snake."

Kramer tightened his latigo and mounted his rangy sorrel. He followed the lazy river south for an hour and reined in on a little rise. Down below he could see a cluster of corrals and board buildings. His eyes narrowed when he saw a man working lone-handed in a lodge-pine corral.

Kramer left his horse and made his way on foot through the jack pines. The brush grew thick right up to the Circle Q corrals, and Kramer moved like an Indian.

Inside the corral, a roughly-dressed man of about thirty-five was doing a tophand's job. He had roped a cow, and snubbed the head to a stout post. Then the cowhand had roped the heels from his horse, stretched out the cow, and tied off the hind legs.

Kramer took the man to be Dyke Anselm. A curved running iron was heating in a chip fire, and Anselm picked it up with a gloved hand. He carried the iron over to the cow and knelt on the bony left hip.

Mart tightened his lips as he

watched a neat job of brand blotting. The cow was marked with the Circle C. Anselm added a little curlycue, closed the "C" to make a circle, and threw his running iron aside. The Circle C cow was now branded Circle Q.

Dyke Anselm shucked his gloves and walked to a fence corner from which his shell-studded gunbelt was hanging. His high heels braked to a stop when Kramer crawled through the rails to cut him off from his six-shooter.

"Nice business you're in, Anselm," Kramer said drily. "That's one way to build up a herd fast. I'm Mart Kramer, in case you're interested."

"Never heard of you," Anselm said in a low voice. "State your business!"

"I was riding to cut for rustler sign," Kramer drawled. "The Circle C has been losing too many critters, and you and I know why."

Anselm spaced his rusty boots for fight. His left hand clenched into a fist, and the move caught Kramer unprepared for what followed.

Anselm slapped across his chest with his right hand, digging under his left arm. Kramer saw the bulge under Anselm's shirt where a hide-out gun was cradled in a Wes Hardin holster.

Mart Kramer dipped his right hand down and up, his six-shooter clearing leather just as Anselm's gun flashed from under the rustler's shirt.

The two guns roared in the high mountain air. They might have made one explosion except for a slight stuttering roll which meant that one gun had shot second.

Dyke Anselm was slapped into a turn with the smoking gun tumbling from his hand. He went to his knees under the battering impact of speeding lead, retched a time or two, and flopped over on his back.

Kramer crouched above his smoking six-shooter with the hammer pronged back for a repeat. A smoke ring made a gun-fighter's halo above his sandy head as he stared at the holes in the high crown of his Stetson lying on the ground. He lowered the hammer, holstered his gun and walked slowly up to the rustler.

"You're a-goin' to die, Anselm," Mart said coldly. "You've got a pard who will cash in on your crooked work. Better give up head before the lights go out for you."

He waited for the wounded man to speak, but Anselm made no answer. Mart dropped to one knee and stared at the pallid face from which all color had drained.

"Fainted like a pilgrim," Kramer muttered contemptuously. "I shot high on purpose, and the rustling son will live to stretch a rope."

Kramer caught the unconscious man by the collar and dragged Anselm to a little tool shed. Catching up a hogging string from a rail, Kramer tied Dyke Anselm's hands behind his back, made a rude bandage for the bullet wound, and shut the door as he left the shed.

MART KRAMER was a cowboy first and last. He climbed the saddle on Anselm's horse after throwing off the hogging string, loosened the dallies from the saddle horn, and threw off the heel rope. The old cow could stand at the snubbing post, but Mart had other things on his mind.

Riding across the corral, he opened the gate from the saddle, rode through, and loped up to the rude board shack which served as the Circle Q ranch house. Leaving the horse at the tie-rail with dragging reins, Kramer slid down and went into the front room.

His nostrils curled with disgust at the mingled odors of stale food and sweaty clothing which permeated the place.

"Boar's nest," he muttered. "He ain't changed his bed in months. Looks like some tally books on the table yonder."

Mart Kramer's face grew hard as he

thumbed through the Circle Q tally books. He counted four hundred and eight calves, shoved the book into a hip pocket, and left the shack by the kitchen door.

The thick brush grew almost up to the house, and Kramer was lost almost at once in the dense growth. Making his way back to his leggy sorrel, Kramer mounted up and rode away from the river on business of his own. He smiled grimly as the sounds of thudding hooves came from the run-down Circle Q.

ROPER BASSETT slid his horse to a stop near the hitch-rail in the Circle Q yard. His Winchester was in the saddle-boot under his left fender, but a heavy .45 six-shooter leaped to the old cattleman's hand as he faced the open door of the shack, with the range detective right behind him.

Glen Tyron frowned and lit down a-running. He yelled hoarsely as though he were on familiar ground.

"Dyke! Where are you, Dyke Anselm?"

"Yeah, where is Anselm?" old Bassett asked suspiciously. "I never did have more than a passing acquaintance with him since he moved in here two years ago."

"He must be around," Tyron answered with a puzzled gleam in his eyes. "There's a chip fire over in yonder corral."

Al Bassett was at the corral peering through the rails. The cow was licking at her brand and stamping at the heel flies. Young Bassett pointed to the dust where a trail showed that something had been dragged to the tool shed.

"I'll have a look-see," Al growled, and crawled into the corral. His startled yell brought the two men to his side as he stared through the door he had jerked open.

"It's Dyke Anselm, and him shot up bad," Tyron said slowly. "He's unconscious."

"I've been hurt worse and done a day's work," Roper Bassett sneered his contempt. "Wonder what in time he was doing with that cow in the corral?"

Al was examining the cow with an expression of understanding in his narrowed eyes. He turned on Tyron with hand close to his gun.

"Anselm was blotting a brand, Tyron," young Bassett accused. "He added two strokes to change our Circle C into a Circle Q. Me and Dad never did like him choosing a brand so close to ours."

"Dyke never did that venting," Tyron said positively. "Can't you see through the play? Rustlers did that job and left the old cow right there to throw suspicion on Anselm. Ten will get you twenty bucks it was Mart Kramer!"

"We branded a mighty lean calf-crop this year," Roper Bassett muttered. "There was good winter feed, and not too much snow. We tallied less than thirty percent, and we never did fall below seventy even in hard years."

"Which is just why the Association sent me up here," Tyron answered earnestly. "Dyke Anselm made the same complaint."

Young Al went back to the tool shed and stood staring down at the unconscious man. Trained to read sign from his childhood, young Al frowned when he spied the empty Wes Hardin holster under the wounded man's left arm. Looking behind him, he saw a snub-nosed gun lying half buried in the red dust of the corral.

"There was a gun ruckus here, Roper," Al told his father, and pointed to the gunbelt hanging on the corner post. "Whoever drilled Dyke had to work fast. He had Anselm cut off from his belt-gun, and this Circle Q boss dug for a hide-out gun under his left arm."

[*Turn To Page* 80]

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"Funny he didn't take the belt-gun," Bassett said thoughtfully.

"It all adds up," Tyron interrupted. "You were framed this morning, old-timer. We caught you red-handed in what was made to look like rustling. This is the same kind of a plant."

ROPER BASSETT remembered as he rubbed his grizzled chin. Wrinkles furrowed his brow as he moved over to join his son at the tool shed.

"What do you make of this, Al?" he asked in a whisper. "I'm mired down up to my hips."

"Let's get Dyke up to the house and bring him around," Al answered loudly. "He can tell us just what happened."

Tyron followed as the Bassetts carried Dyke Anselm to the dirty front room in the little board shack. Al wrinkled his nose with disgust as they laid the wounded man on a dirty bunk. A second bunk had not been made up, and Al spoke his mind bluntly.

"I never heard of Anselm having any help, but some gent has been sleeping in that other pigpen yonder."

"I've had considerable experience with gun-shot wounds," Tyron spoke up. "You gents ride out and cut for sign while I take care of Dyke."

Bassett shook his gray head slowly.

"You and Al ride a circle," he suggested. "I'll take care of Dyke, if I can stand the stink of this hog-pen."

"You heard the old man," Al said to Tyron. "Let's you and me top our broncs and get in a few licks before it gets dark on us. The rustler who shot Dyke can't be far away. C'mon!"

Tyron stared at Dyke Anselm, and then followed Al from the room. Like a hound on a hot scent, Al rode around the corral which held the old cow, pointed to some tracks, and motioned with his head for Tyron to take the lead.

"You're a range detective," Al Bassett said simply. "Bend the lead and hit a high lope along that plain trail."

"You know this country better than I do," Tyron argued. "You hit out, and I'll tail you close."

Al flushed with anger. He was about to make an issue of who would ride in front, but the faint bellow of a six-shooter brought both men upright in their saddles.

MART KRAMER rode through the brush, searching the little grassy pockets. He jumped an old Circle C cow in the brush, and a yearling steer charged after the cow which was making for a scrub-oak motte.

Kramer's six-shooter leaped to his hand and roared like a cannon. The young steer did a hoolihan head-over-heels, with a bullet under the left leg. Kramer slid from the saddle, anchored his sorrel with trailing reins, and pulled a skinning knife from a sheath at the left side of his gunbelt.

Like a hunter who knows his business, Kramer made four quick slashes with his keen-bladed knife. The four cuts formed a square around the Circle Q brand, and Kramer cut the piece of hide away from the flesh.

Kramer drew out the Circle Q tally book, placed the square of hide between two pages, and stuck the book back in his hip pocket. Wiping the blade of his skinning knife on the dead steer, Kramer sheathed the weapon and mounted his sorrel.

Following a deer trail through the scrub oak, the square-jawed cowboy turned his horse toward the Circle Q. A puzzled gleam showed briefly in his eyes as a pistol shot echoed behind him, but Mart kept on riding until he came to the Circle Q.

Leaving his sorrel in the brush, Kramer made his stealthy way to the kitchen door and paused to listen. His nostrils twitched like a hound's that has smelled fresh blood, and Kramer went through the house behind his cocked six-shooter.

[*Turn To Page* 82]

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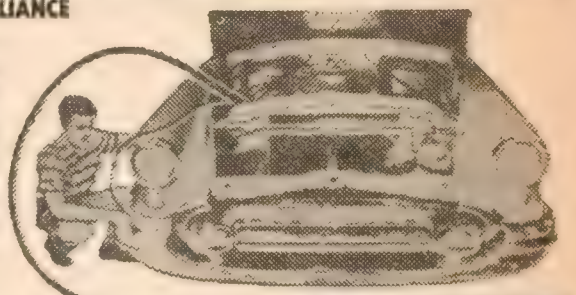

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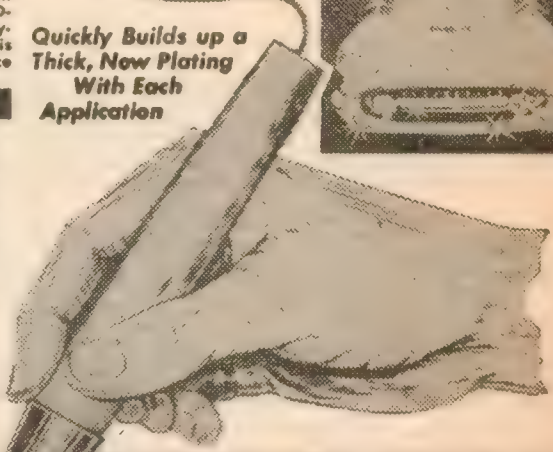

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Mart Kramer stopped at the door leading to the front room with a stunned look on his bronzed face. Old Roper Bassett was down on the floor with his head under him, just in front of the bunk on which the wounded man was lying.

Kramer grunted softly as he stared at Dyke Anselm. Bassett had removed Anselm's shirt to work on the wound. A deep wound showed where a knife had been plunged in Dyke Anselm's chest, and Anselm's eyes were wide open.

"Get 'em high, you rustling killer!"

Kramer holstered his gun very slowly and raised both hands. Young Al Bassett faced him from the doorway with a cocked six-shooter in his right hand. Blood was seeping from a wound in the Circle C cowboy's left shoulder, dripping slowly from his fingers.

"You took a sneak shot at me back there in the draw where I found that dead steer!" Al Bassett accused hotly. Then you circled back here, beefed the old man, and stuck your knife in Anselm to keep him from talking!"

"Stop fighting your head, younker," Kramer said quietly. "I didn't shoot you, and I didn't do this dirty job here. I came in the back way and found what you see, and I was so stunned I didn't hear you ride in."

"I'm going to kill you, Kramer," Al said slowly, and his voice sounded faint and far away. "I'm bleeding out, but I'll get you before I cave!"

MART KRAMER stared as young Bassett began to sway. He could see the cowboy's finger tighten on the

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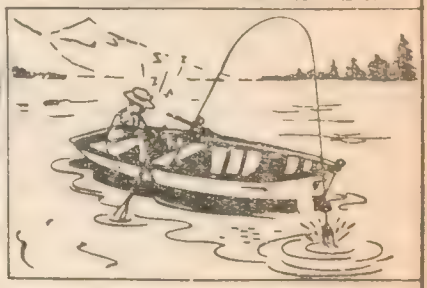

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trigger, and Kramer made a headlong dive to the left just as Al fell forward with the gun blasting in his hand.

Kramer felt the scrape of a bullet along his short ribs just before he hit the floor and rolled over. He dismissed his own slight wound with a shrug, pulled Al away from the door, and closed it.

Roper Bassett was groaning softly, and Kramer emptied the old cattleman's holster.

Kramer grunted and took a piggin' string from a wooden peg. Rolling the old cattleman over, Kramer bound Bassett's wrists behind his back, propped Roper against a wall, and reached for the probes lying on a chair. The same probes Roper had used to remove the bullet from Dyke Anselm's wound.

Kramer stripped the shirt away from Al's left shoulder, examined the wound and went to work. Under the anesthesia of bullet shock, Al remained perfectly quiet while Kramer performed his crude but effective surgery.

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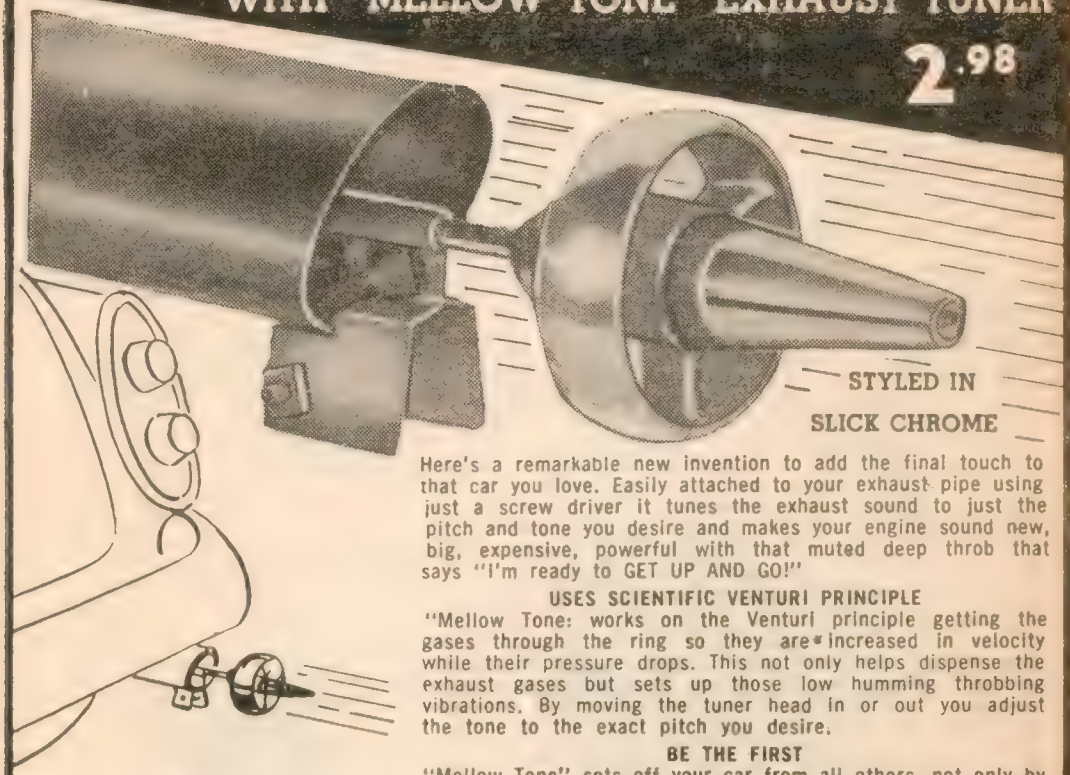

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gray eyes. He hunched his wide shoulders when a gun-muzzle prodded his spine.

"Drop that gun and get inside!"

Mart Kramer obeyed as he recognized the hoarse voice of Glen Tyron, who had entered through the back door.

Tyron glanced around the room, stared at Anselm, and threatened Kramer through tightly clenched teeth.

"So you circled back and killed Dyke after tolling me and young Al away with that pistol shot!"

"That ain't all he did," Roper Bassett spoke up suddenly. "He slapped me over the head with his cutter, but I've been watching him probe the bullet out of young Al's shoulder. Who shot Al?"

"Kramer did," Al Bassett accused in a faint voice. "I found his sign all over the place where he had shot a young steer!"

"Make up your minds," Mart Kramer said drily. "I couldn't have shot Al first, and then got back here in time to kill Dyke Anselm, and buffalo old Roper over the head. It *could* have been the other way around, if you catch the drift."

Glen Tyron approached Kramer slowly and then lashed out suddenly with the gun in his right hand. The barrel struck Kramer a glancing blow on the head, and he slid to the floor beside old Bassett.

Tyron stepped back and holstered

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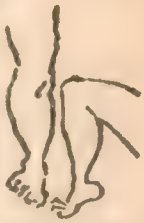

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his heavy gun. He walked over to the table, rummaged through the litter, and turned to Al Bassett.

"Did you find the Circle Q tally book?"

MART KRAMER'S right hand caught up the gun he had taken from the old cattleman. He pushed slowly erect while Tyron was staring at Al, holstered the gun, and coughed slightly.

Tyron whirled around like a trapped wolf. His hand started for his gun. The stern voice of Kramer stopped him.

"Let it ride, Tyron. We can settle our score after we make medicine. I've got the Circle Q tally book."

Old Roper Bassett leaned forward. Mart Kramer reached slowly to his hip pocket with his left hand, and brought out the worn tally book.

"Listen, gents," Kramer began quietly. "The Circle Q is running a hundred and eighty head of she-stuff. The tally book gives the Circle Q four hundred and eight head of calves. All those Circle Q cows had twins, and some of 'em had triplets!"

"That gives you no call to kill Anselm while he was unconscious," Tyron blustered. "I suspicioned him, and he even went so far as to vent the brand on a Circle C cow."

"He and his pard went farther than that," Kramer accused sternly. "He was venting the brand on young beef steers. I've got one here in my pocket; took it from that young steer I shot back in the tangles."

Glen Tyron stared as Kramer took the square of hide from the tally book. Tyron read the brand as Kramer held it for the three men to see.

"That's a Circle Q brand!"

"Yeah," Kramer agreed. "The brand-blotter used a running iron to close the C, and he added a curlycue to make the Q."

[*Turn To Page* 90]

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"Now you take an old brand that's been stamped," Kramer explained patiently. "Haired over and all healed up. Say some rustler runs a few more lines on the brand after it's healed."

He held the piece of hide up to an open window, and the three men stared suspiciously. Roper was the first to speak.

"By dogies, Kramer's right!"

Glen Tyron remained silent, shifting his boots nervously. Mart Kramer took a folded paper from the tally book and let it drop on the floor. The picture of a tall lean-faced man stared back from the paper.

"Say!" Roper Bassett almost shouted. "I've seen that hombre before. He was up here about two months ago riding the range. Wait a minute! It has his name printed underneath. *Glen Tyron, Association Detective!*"

"That's right, and a pard of mine," Kramer said quietly, but his deep voice was like morning frost. "Glen was murdered by a gent name of Jud Anselm,

[*Turn To Page* 92]

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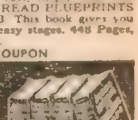

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half-brother to Dyke. You're under arrest, Jud Anselm."

THE MAN who had posed as Glen Tyron settled his boots for balance. His right hand hovered above the handles of his gun, and he struck down like the swoop of a hunting hawk.

Mart Kramer flipped his hand and pronged back the hammer on the uppull. His borrowed gun made a deafening roar in the low ceilinged room, echoed by the blast of Jud Anselm's murder gun.

Kramer waited behind his gun until the rustler's boots had stopped rattling. Then he drew his knife and freed old Bassett from his bonds. Roper Bassett stared at the moist knife before he spoke.

"I saw that knife when I roused around, Kramer. I thought you had killed Dyke."

"Why did you shoot me?" Al Bassett asked hoarsely.

Kramer stepped forward and picked up his own six-shooter from the floor where he had dropped it.

"Look," he said to young Al. "My cutter is a Peacemaker .45 Colt. Yonder is the bullet I probed out of your shoulder. Fired from a Frontier .44 Colt. Now take a look at Jud Anselm's six-shooter."

"It's a .44 Colt," Al murmured. "And there's the knife in his belt he used to kill his brother, to keep him from talking. Who are you, Mart?"

"I told you," Kramer growled. "I'm a range detective, and the Association sent me up here. The Anselms didn't belong, and I'm declaring the Circle Q brand vacated. You gents can cut out your stuff, and we will call in all C. P. A. members. And it's a good idea to make sure who you are riding with when you start cutting for rustler sign!"

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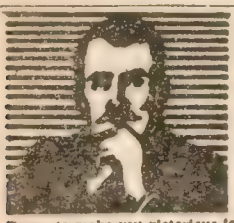

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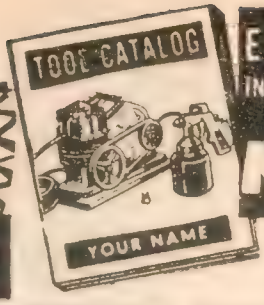

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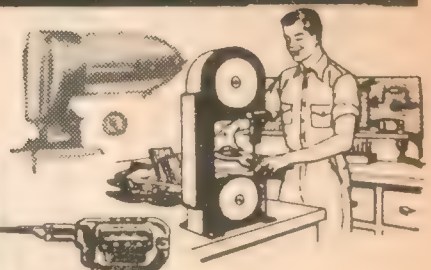

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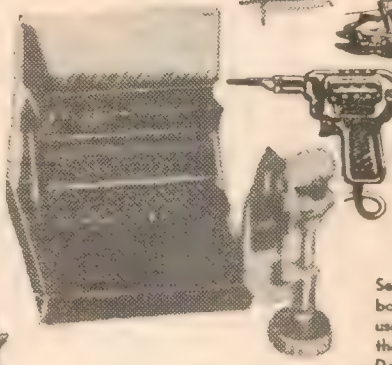

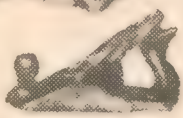

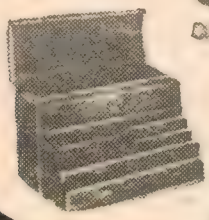

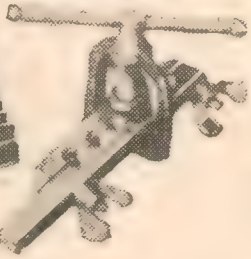

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Sell tools to your friends, neighbors, for industrial and institutional use. Everyone needs tools. Meet the demands of the tremendous Do-It-Yourself Market. Build your own business selling nationally advertised tools from an illustrated coded catalog Bearing your name and only your name on it. You get all the orders and reorders. You sell merchandise that is pre-sold for you through national advertising by the country's leading tool manufacturers, such as Black and Decker, Clemson, Disston, K & E, Luftkin, Millers Falls, Ridgid, Stanley, Thor, Wiss and many others! You need not carry any stock—use our capital! All orders received are shipped the same day from our warehouse stock of over 15,000 items. All merchandise sold on unconditional money-back guarantee, Don't Wait. Act today! Send $1.00 Deposit for Dealer's card and get our giant new 1958 wholesale catalog at no extra charge. Your $1.00 is credited to your first purchase or refunded if you are not 100% satisfied. MAIL COUPON NOW! Tool Discount House, Dept. 80, 72 Prospect Street, Paterson, New Jersey.

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403 Market St., Newark, N. J.

I am enclosing $1.00. Rush me your dealer's card and big Catalog Today. If I am not completely satisfied with your plan, I understand that I can return the Dealer's Card and Catalog for refund, and if I decide to order, my $1.00 will be deductible from my first order.

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Write today for this terrific catalog of CLOTHING BARGAINS! Dress up your whole family . . . sis, son, dad, in the grandest of style for just several dollars complete. Here's a few sample bargains . . .

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BEAUTYAIDS COMPANY, Dept. 126
403 Market Street, Newark, New Jersey

ANSWERS

to the Cow Country Quiz

1. You bring the herd up and spread them out along the bank, with the lead cattle headed downstream. The leads get there first and drink clear water; and as the drags keep coming in they get clear water, too, because they are upstream.

2. In the winter of 1884-'85, the Kansas quarantine law was passed which forbid Texas cattle to enter their state.

3. Pin-wheeling is a forward, upward plunge of a bucking broncho.

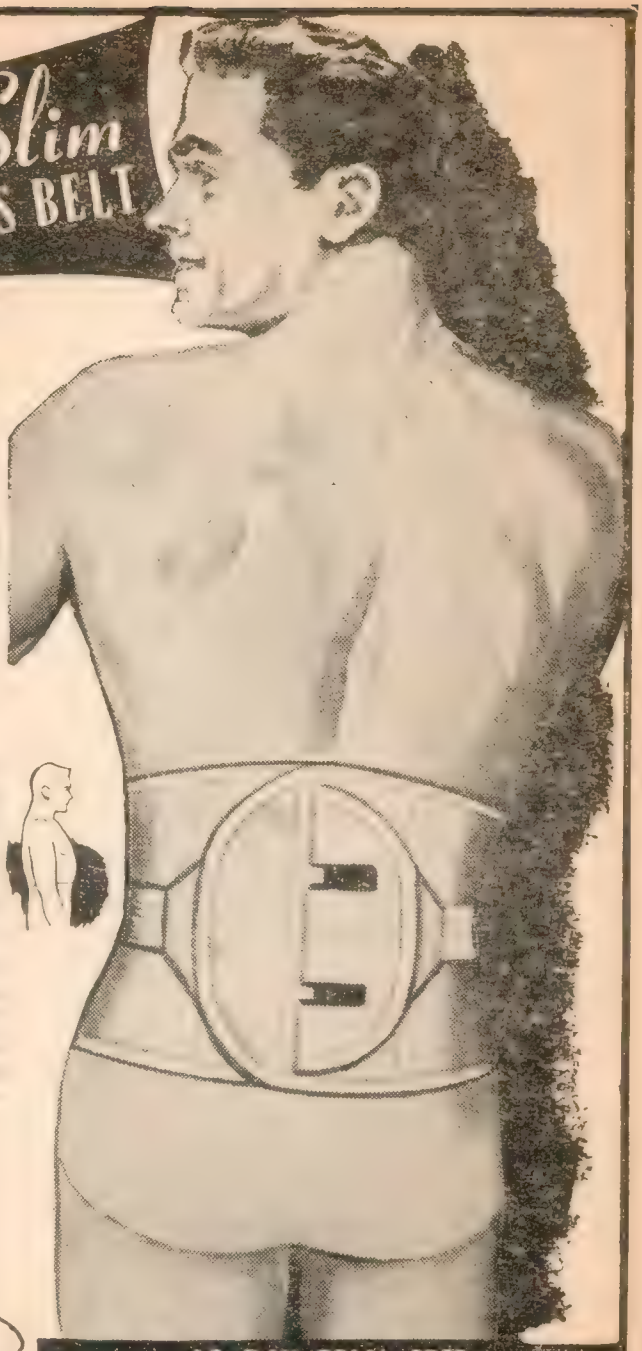
4. According to the Westerner's way of thinking, a "fence lifter" is a very hard rain.

5. Your oldtime Western friend would be going after a horse with a bushy tail.

[*Turn To Page* 96]

Wonder Slim
OUR BEST MEN'S BELT

ONLY **4.98**



WORKS WONDERS FOR YOUR BACK

LOOK SLIM — FEEL TRIM

Wonder Slim is a new kind of men's supporter belt. Its ingenious contour design follows nature's own lines—permits remarkable freedom of movement. Its patented sliding back panel makes it the easiest belt to put on . . . provides "quick as a flash" adjustment for constant perfect fit. No uncomfortable crotch. Scientific "no pressure" boning flattens the bulge gently but firmly. Sliding back provides support just where you need it for youthful posture . . . fights the feeling of fatigue. Made of super test herringbone twill. Waist sizes 26-44—Only $4.98. Try it at our risk.

FEATURES

Takes inches off waist
Raises abdomen and keeps it in
Gives vital back support
Straightens sagging stomach muscles
Gives your clothes that custom-made look

10 DAY TRIAL FREE

S. J. Wegman Co. Dept. GW-84
Lynbrook, N. Y.

Rush my Wonder-Slim back supporter at once. If I am not 100% satisfied I may return it for prompt refund of the full purchase price.

Waist Size.....inches

☐ Send C.O.D. I'll pay postman $4.98 plus a few cents postage.
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COMMERCIAL artists WANTED by advertising agencies, publishers, newspapers, dept. stores, to fill HIGH-PAYING JOBS! 95 MILLION DOLLARS being spent for commercial art every year. Now YOU can prepare to enter this profitable field — become your own boss and command BIG FEES. You can learn Commercial Art, lettering, designing, cartooning—right at home, in spare time. Easy, SHOW-HOW LESSONS. INEXPENSIVE. Send for FREE book, "Art For Pleasure And Profit." Describes our method. Lists opportunities. Tells how you can get ahead FAST in Commercial Art. Write NOW to: **Washington School of Art, Studio 1283, Port Washington, N.Y.**

HER PERFUME HIGHLIGHTED HER GLAMOUR!

Why shouldn't it have? She was using the same type as a famous FRENCH PERFUME selling at $17 an ounce. But she only paid $1 for 3 attractive 1 dram vials. Send your $1 now for 3 different well-known types and save tax and postage. Value $5.

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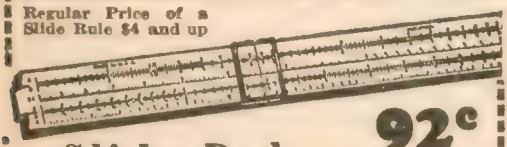

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MAGNETIC LODESTONES are truly ANCIENT. Romans and Greeks used them in BIBLICAL TIMES. We offer our ANCIENT BRAND of highly MAGNETIC LODESTONES, the same type the ANCIENTS may have used. Our ANCIENT BRAND of highly MAGNETIC LODESTONES come to you in a red flannel bag, together with a so-called Talismanic Seal of Luck No. 20, as shown in the 6th and 7th BOOK OF MOSES by Louis de Claremont. All FOUR items for only $2.00 postpaid or $2.50 C.O.D. We make no claims and sell them only as curios.

ANCIENT PRODUCTS, DEPT. 252-B
504 HICKSVILLE RD, MASSAPEQUA, N. Y.

WESTERN ACTION

6. The cowpuncher's slang term "fumadiddle" means fancy dress.
7. A *fuste* is a Mexican saddle.
8. According to a cowpuncher's way of thinking, "giggle talk" is foolish speech.
9. If you had a horse of a grulla color, you would have a mouse-colored horse.
10. A "hell stick" is what oldtime cowmen called the sulphur match.
11. A "yack" is a foolish or stupid individual.
12. Utah.
13. Badger, prairie dog, gopher, sand rat, etc.
14. Texas.
15. False. The Seven Cities of Cibola were said to be in present New Mexico.
16. Arizona.
17. True. No matter how incredible it may seem, the Dalton brothers, the James boys, and the Youngers were all first cousins.
18. In 1895, the X I T ranch in the Texas Panhandle brought up the last three herds of cattle on the Texas trail.

NEW DISCOVERY IN HYPNOTISM

shows how to hypnotize in 30 seconds!

Yes, an amazing new method has been developed to bring on quick, easy induction of the hypnotic trance. Now, for the first time, you too can benefit from this recent discovery in hypnotic induction.

QUICK RESULTS

Want to hypnotize your friends? Your club members? HOW TO HYPNOTIZE is a remarkable primer that shows you just how to master the latest improved induction methods. The author, a widely experienced hypnotist and consultant, gives you the exact positions to take, the precise phraseology, all the steps necessary to hypnotize even the most difficult subjects.

EXCLUSIVELY in How to HYPNOTIZE

ENTIRELY NEW METHOD

Until recently the process of hypnotic induction was largely based on trial and error methods which succeeded mainly with subjects who were highly susceptible to hypnosis in the first place. The truth is that these highly susceptible subjects make up a very small percentage of the population. That is why amateurs and beginning hypnotists have so often been disappointed in their attempts at trance induction. Now, however, recent scientific research has developed ENTIRELY NEW METHODS that are not only sure fire in their results but quick and easy to achieve! For the first time, these new methods are presented in HOW TO HYPNOTIZE in language that you can easily and successfully follow on the very first reading!

SHOWS YOU STEP BY STEP

This book — which has been acclaimed by doctors and psychologists — is guaranteed to give you all the know-how necessary to induce the trance state in others. It not only explains the latest discoveries in hypnotic induction, but it shows step by step, move by move, exactly how to bring on the trance; how to transform the trance into deeper and still deeper states; and how to terminate the trance quickly and effectively without any dangers whatsoever. You are even given alternative methods, so that you can actually chose the one that suits you best.

USED BY DOCTORS

The book that is being used by doctors and psychologists to learn hypnotic induction is now available to you

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Photographically Illustrated

40 photographic illustrations show how you can achieve trance induction in as little as 30 seconds!

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FREE 10-day examination of this book is offered to you if you mail us coupon today. If not delighted with results return it within 10 days for a full refund of the purchase price.

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★ The Conqueror

by Edward Garner

To *Gold's Saloon,* one day at noon,
A swaggering stranger came,
With a king-size sneer and an evil leer,
And eyes that spewed hate's flame.
His handle, he said, for all to hear,
Was Barbera's Barbed Wire Strame.

"...and I don't mean Barberous," he said,
In a voice that was cold as sleet,
"It's Barbera's; and that's a name
For a man that you seldom meet."
He scowled, and seemed to be lost in thought,
Then called for a whiskey neat.

To the bar there strolled in a manner bold,
The sheriff, both tough and game,
And to the stranger, drinking near,
Asked, "What, sir, is your name?"
He wrote with bullets on the wall,
"Barbera's Barbed Wire Strame."

The shooting phase could win no praise
From the lawman—it got his goat.
He drew his gun to take Barbed Wire
To the house with the iron-barred note.
But Barbed Wire took the gun and rammed
It down the sheriff's throat!

Eight men then ganged up on Barbed Wire,
To subjugate him well.
One was Fangs Whetstine; one Snake Horne;
And one was Gila Brell,—
Plus Rabies Young, and four mean gents
Some claimed had broke from hell!

Barbed Wire's lip curled; his guns then hurled
Their hot-lead antidotes,
That pierced the hearts, that pierced the lungs,
That pierced the gasping throats
Of these eight toughs, and sent them where
They'd sow no more wild oats!

Into the bar, a woman walked;
Those who were standing near,
Said she was small, about five foot.
Barbed Wire saw her appear;
His face turned pale, and he seemed to quail,
Beset by craven fear!

"Barbera's Barbed Wire ran away,
The naughty boy," she said,
And Barbed Wire stood like one who wished
That he were a long-time dead.
"Come, now," she said, "and mama'll make
You tasty ginger bread!"

Barbed Wire now winced; and then, convinced
That now he had no chance,
Felt to his face the torture creep,
And cover its whole expanse;
And Barbera smiled for all to see,
Then kicked him in the pants!

★

YOUR CAR MUST START INSTANTLY! — OR MONEY BACK!

Save Money With Amazing New Liquid That Makes "Dead Batteries" Spring to Life Instantly — Makes New Batteries Trouble-Free for 10 Years or More!

NO MORE BATTERY TROUBLE FOR THE LIFE OF YOUR CAR!

Detroit, Michigan — National Airlines, the battery manufacturers, trucking companies, yacht clubs and diesel users ... are praising the amazing chemical, non-acid liquid—"VX/6"—that *sends a surge of never-failing power through your battery INSTANTLY ... even if your car has been in dead storage for 6 months ... in broiling desert heat ... in 40° below zero arctic weather ... in jungles where rain falls for 90 days at a time ... in' submarines ... in around the world air flights!*

Yes, a brilliant chemical engineer has perfected an entirely new liquid formula that makes even a "dead battery" spring to life instantly ... that makes *any* battery—old or new—*good for 10 years or longer!* Now you can start your car in one second ... *never have a run-down battery for the rest of your life!*

This is the most electrifying development of the past sixty years for you 130 million car owners.

Imagine! For only a few pennies you can have 24-hour a day insurance against battery failures from now on! No more stopping dead on crowded highways, in tunnels, on bridges. No more expensive tows, no more laying out $25.00 to $40.00 every year for new batteries! Now — even if your present battery is two years old and can't take another charge ... you can give it more *power* than it had when new simply by pouring "VX/6" into each cell ... and the instantaneous new power will never fail you ... *you can start instantly—within one second—at least 27 times ... every day for the next 10 years!* There never was a guarantee like this in automotive history! Think of what this means to you. Your new or old-beat-up battery must turn over instantly 27 times a day for the life of your car ... or *we'll pay the cost of getting your* battery started anytime, anywhere between now and the time you sell your car ... *and refund your money, too!* This is an unconditional guarantee. Only a battery additive that has been subjected to every kind of "torture test" on over 10,000 cars over a period of 5 years before it was released to the public would dare make such a guarantee! Battery Additive is recognized and accepted by the Bureau of Standards. Used to improve torpedo propulsion systems, by industry, airlines, diesel locomotives, battery manufacturers, air conditioning plants, truck fleet owners. Ships at sea, such as the Queen Mary, and Queen Elizabeth use similar devices. *Is insured against failure by famous Lloyds of London!*

NATIONAL AIRLINES RECHARGED TRUCK BATTERIES EVERY 3 DAYS — NOW 3,750 STARTS ... EACH BATTERY GOOD FOR 10 YEARS MORE!

National Airlines used fork-lift trucks ... each averaged 125 starts a day on busy airfields. As a result, EACH BATTERY HAD TO BE RECHARGED EVERY THREE OR FOUR DAYS! Since "VX/6" was added, each truck has been started on an average of 3,750 times without one recharge! Result: savings of thousands of dollars, savings of man hours ... and each battery is now good for at least 10 years more of over 100 starts a day!

Why you are forced to buy a new battery in the next 8 months if you drive your car regularly!

As you know, your battery supplies the electric current for the ignition, all your engine equipment — PLUS POWER TO CRANK YOUR ENGINE!

When you use any of the equipment (radio, heater, windshield wipers, lights, etc.) or when you leave your car stand idle, the battery discharges electric current. Two things happen:

1. Some of the active materials from the lead plates shed or fall off forming useless "battery mud". THIS IS THE FIRST REASON YOU LOSE POWER ...

2. Since all storage batteries contain a number of cells, each of which encloses several lead plates and separators, and since each cell is filled with water and sulphuric acid, an electrochemical action must take place in which the acid coming in contact with the lead plates makes electrical current. When the plates are partially covered with hard, inactive lead sulphate, the electrochemical action cannot take place and the battery goes dead!

How you must save with "VX/6"

1. Every time you recharge your present battery you *shorten its life and you add to the cost of the battery! With "VX/6" you can stop worrying about recharging your battery ... never shorten its life ... never add expenses to your car overhead!*

2. Every time your battery runs down, you strain the generator of your automobile. A dead battery will eventually ruin the other electrical equipment in the engine. *Only with "VX/6" can you extend the life of your battery and prevent the costly damage a dead battery will cause!*

3. A dead, irreparable battery may constitute expensive, sometimes damaging towing charges. *You will save this costly road service immediately with "VX/6" in your present battery.*

4. Your present day battery must run down regardless of the amount of use it receives. Since your battery is not a lifetime battery you will eventually have to spend $25 to $35 on a new battery. *Only with "VX/6" in your battery can you insure against a dead battery and additional battery expenses.*

5. If you depend on your car, and can't use it due to battery failure, you will run up additional expenses in transportation.

Thousands of testimonials like these

We highly recommend "VX/6" to everyone. No danger of overcharge ... never any need to recharge a battery with this amazing liquid in batteries. Gives batteries a never-failing surge of power ... that lasts and lasts.
L. A., Miami Battery Exchange
Miami, Florida

Started using "VX/6" four years ago. Saved us $400 on maintenance and replacement costs ... to say nothing of inconvenience of batteries "going dead." J. S., Associated Diamond Cabs
Miami, Florida

Have been using "VX/6" in our 30 trucks for past few years. This non-acid formula is years ahead ... it means we can use worn-out batteries for years more, has tripled and more the life of present batteries. L. G., Sunny Brook Farms
Miami, Florida

Tried "VX/6" in batteries with two dead cells ... after pouring in "VX/6" BATTERIES WITH DEAD CELLS SHOWED FULL CAPACITY! Same results on thousands of other batteries tested.
L. J., Imperial Battery Company
Miami, Florida

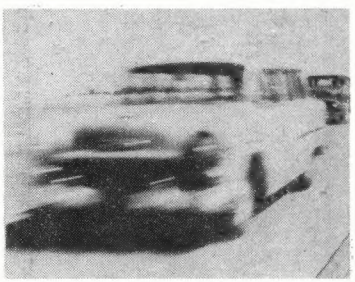
A million times better than sulphuric acid ... 400% more economical, more efficient in blistering heat ... NOW OUR TRUCKS ENJOY FASTER STARTING, BRIGHTER LIGHTS, AND BETTER OPERATION OF ALL ELECTRICAL EQUIPMENT!
I. S., National Mover Co.
Miami, Florida

Have used "VX/6" in all batteries for over three years. NOT ONE SINGLE BATTERY FAILURE YET. THIS IS A MIRACLE AND A SAVINGS OF THOUSANDS OF DOLLARS FOR A BIG FLEET SUCH AS OURS.
A. S., Mechanics Overall Service
Miami, Florida

Most of the batteries traded in are "weak" or "dead". BUT "VX/6" TURNED OLD BATTERIES INTO NEW BATTERIES ... NOT ONE REPLACEMENT YET! IT'S AMAZING!
B. S., Dixie Motors
Miami, Florida

Over 30,837,000 batteries went dead in traffic in 1956!

It's a true fact — as you can easily find out. Imagine! Over thirty million cars "stopped dead" in heavy traffic ... in the middle of bridges ... in tunnels ... on speed highways! Whole weekends were ruined! Families stood shivering by the roadside while the driver had to walk to put in an emergency call for a tow truck. Thousands of others had to flag down cars and taxies and offer ten dollars or more for a push! *Still others were killed on highways trying to get the car started!* Play safe — pour a little "VX/6" in each battery cell and you can have complete peace of mind ... for years to come. No matter how old your battery cell is ... you can take cross-country trips, travel over steaming deserts, plough through snow ... leave your car standing in the rain — YET YOUR BATTERY WILL ALWAYS TURN OVER THE VERY INSTANT YOU TOUCH THE STARTER BUTTON ... 27 times a day for the life of your car with amazing "VX/6" to safeguard you.



World famed Reader's Digest tells the astonishing story!

Yes, the Reader's Digest released the exciting story of how a battery can last longer than the life of a car! It tells how the battery is every motorist's greatest headache. If left unattended, it dies. If it gets low in subzero weather, it is likely to crack. It usually has to be replaced every year-and-a-half! Yet *now you can have a battery that runs 10 years or more!* Now you can have the same lifetime power as an expensive nickel-cadmium battery famous the world over ... simply by pouring in a little "VX/6" into each cell!

Public Service Laboratory tests with "VX/6"

PROCEDURE: A discarded Delco 6 Volt battery was used for the following tests. History of this battery indicated that it had failed in use and was unable to hold a charge.

I. We added "VX/6" and charged the battery.

II. Battery was installed on 1955 Ford. With lights and radio on and ignition off. Self starter was run until battery was so run down, lights would not function or starter turn over. After less than two minutes with lights turned off battery started car motor with a surge of power regained during brief 90 second interval.

III. Battery was subjected to 40°F below Zero temperature for a continuous 24 hour period. Tests after 24 hours indicated ability to instantly start motor and operate electrical system at full efficiency. No loss of voltage occurred.

IV. Battery was subjected to an oven temperature of 160°F. No loss of electrolyte solution or power was indicated by test, and ability to perform starting and electrical functions remained at full rated efficiency.

V. After treating battery with "VX/6" and restoring power, 25% increase in light brightness was noted.

With "VX/6" in your battery you will find improvements you never expected!

1. Your headlights are 25% brighter.
2. Check your battery — will show higher terminal voltage.
3. Car starts immediately — time after time.
4. Extra reserve of power for radio, heater, etc.
5. Your battery recuperates its power faster.
6. Strong enough to start in sub-normal, cold or heat.

TAKE THIS 4-SECOND BATTERY CHECK RIGHT NOW! DELAYS ARE COSTLY!

Open the hood of your car and look at the battery. The green or white formations you see around the anode and cathode, on the top and sides is *sulphation!* Sulphation means your battery is collecting mud ... the plates are flaking and the battery is *dying!* UNLESS YOU ADD "VX/6" IMMEDIATELY, YOU WILL HAVE TO SPEND $25.00 to $40.00 FOR A NEW BATTERY!

INSURED BY FAMOUS LLOYD'S OF LONDON!

Yes, the most famous insurance company on the globe—Lloyd's of London—have insured "VX/6" against failure. It's also approved by the Miami Better Business Bureau ... tested and approved by the "Public Service" ... you KNOW that if it doesn't do everything we claim ... you get your money back now ... next year ... in 1960 or in 1967. No new product ever released to the public was ever backed by such careful testing ... was ever endorsed by so many giant companies, was ever used by so many countries and leaders of industry!

MAIL NO-RISK COUPON ... THIS VERY SECOND!

VOLTEX COMPANY Dept. DA-5
P. O. Box 444, Great Neck, N. Y.

Gentlemen:
I'm sold! Send me a giant-sized bottle of "VX/6" immediately ... enough for either a three or six cell battery! It is understood that if my battery doesn't start instantly ... and if it doesn't start instantly for at least 27 times a day for the life of my car ... I can claim my money back. I will pay the postman just the amount checked below plus C.O.D. charges: ☐ $2.98

Name_____

Address_____

City_____ Zone_____ State_____

☐ SAVE 50¢. I enclose check, cash or money order and it is understood YOU WILL PAY THE POSTAGE. Same money-back guarantee!

Over and over again—It's the same old story...

Finally a formula that really works

"Our fights have turned to kisses!"

It's hard to believe that my wife and I used to fight. We always argued and bickered. The only real reason for it was that both of us always felt so tired that we got on each other's nerves. Our family doctor told us many people become worn-out and short-tempered because their diets do not contain enough vitamins and minerals. To correct this condition we began taking Vitasafe Capsules! Before long we had more pep, our dispositions improved, we were back in each other's arms! Why don't you try Vitasafe Capsules and judge the results for yourself?

"I was ashamed to always be so tired!"

I always felt simply "run-down" and didn't know why until my doctor put me wise. He explained *why* I felt "tired"—*why* my youthful vigor was slipping away—and suggested that a nutritional vitamin-mineral formula could help. One day I sent for a 30-day trial supply of high-potency Vitasafe Capsules, and after taking one capsule each day for a short time, I began to feel *new zest for living!* Today I feel great—*and you may too!* See for yourself if you can again feel peppy and full of life. Mail the coupon as I did!

25¢ just to help cover shipping expenses of this

FREE 30-DAY SUPPLY High-Potency Capsules

LIPOTROPIC FACTORS, VITAMINS AND MINERALS

Safe nutritional formula containing 27 proven ingredients: Glutamic Acid, Choline, Inositol, Methionine, Citrus Bioflavonoid, 11 Vitamins plus 11 Minerals

To prove to you the remarkable advantages of the Vitasafe Plan... we will send you, without charge, a 30-day free supply of high potency VITASAFE C.F. CAPSULES so you can discover for yourself how much healthier, happier and peppier you may feel after a few days' trial! Just one of these capsules each day supplies your body with over *twice* the minimum adult daily requirement of Vitamins A, C, and D—*five times* the minimum adult daily requirement of Vitamin B-1, and the *full* concentration recommended by the National Research Council for the other four important vitamins!

Vitasafe Capsules also contain Glutamic Acid, a natural substance derived from wheat gluten and thought by many doctors to help nourish the brain cells for more power of concentration and increased mental alertness. And now, to top off this exclusive formula each capsule also brings you an important dosage of Citrus Bioflavonoid—the anti-cold factor that has been so widely acclaimed.

AMAZING PLAN SLASHES VITAMIN PRICES ALMOST IN HALF

With your free vitamins you will also receive complete details regarding the benefits of this amazing new Plan that provides you regularly with all the factory-fresh vitamins and minerals you will need. *You are under no obligation to buy anything!* If after taking your free Capsules for three weeks you are not entirely satisfied, simply return the handy postcard that comes with your free supply and that will end the matter. Otherwise it's up to us—you don't have to do a thing—and we will see that you get your monthly supplies of capsules *on time* for as long as you wish, at the low money-saving price of only $2.78 per month *(a saving of 45%)*.

VITASAFE CORP. **444**
43 West 61st Street, New York 23, N. Y.

Yes, I accept your generous no-risk offer under the Vitasafe Plan as advertised in WESTERN ACTION.

Send me my FREE 30-day supply of high-potency Vitasafe Capsules as checked below:

☐ **Man's Formula** ☐ **Woman's Formula**

I ENCLOSE 25¢ PER PACKAGE to pay for packing and postage.

Name .....

Address .....

City ..... **Zone** ..... **State** .....

This offer is limited to those who have never before taken advantage of this generous trial. Only one trial supply per person.

IN CANADA: 394 Symington Ave., Toronto 9, Ont.
(Canadian Formula adjusted to local conditions.)

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